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OR.

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FRENCH SPY," "AZHOFF THE
AXMAN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPIDER.

HUBERT ULSTER, Banker, No. — Elliott
avenue, St. Louis.

Which takes the reader to the city of St. Louis at a time when its population had not quite reached 126,000.

The residence to which we call attention was commodious, three storied, of square build, and

the last, or end, of five similar to it in weird architecture.

Hubert Ulster lived alone, with but two exceptions—these two exceptions a niece and an intimate servitor.

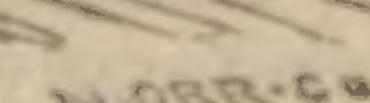
On the night of September 19, 18—, the banker was alone in one of the rooms on the second floor, which overlooked a flourishing garden that footed upon a broad common—a room furnished richly, with all the appointments of a library; with monstrous bookcases surmounted by historic busts; intermediate shelves, pictorial files and costly paintings; draping curtains that waved and flashed lazily in a breeze through the window; thick, soft carpeting; a frescoed ceiling, with massive chandelier for lamps.

He sat at a large desk, with a tall, shaded lamp burning brilliantly, and a pile of papers jumbled by his hands as they rested immovably on the surface of the desk—and one of these papers appeared to be a diagram or plan

of the interior of an edifice. But not the rays of the lamp that shone full in his face, nor the pile of papers collected before him, nor the drip of the drizzling rain outside the window behind him, seemed to engage or attract him, for his head hung heavily forward on his breast, and his deep, regular respiration told that he slumbered.

He had been asleep thus for more than an hour. Within a few minutes gone there had sounded a dull, prolonged halloo from the furthest end of the garden; but the breaking of the solemn stillness did not arouse him, for he was locked in the power of a dream, one that must have been unpleasant, as his brow was overcast, his features scowling, and occasionally the chin rose spasmodically from the breast, while his lips moved wordlessly and his fingers twitched.

Presently it came again, and then for the third time, a cry like a call or a signal, and the last was louder, entering distinctly through



JUST INSIDE THE RIM OF THE DOOR STOOD A REPULSIVE SHAPE, A HALF-HUMAN, HALF-UNEARTHLY BEING.

the window, and penetrating the ears of the sleeper.

The sunken head straightened suddenly; he started from his disagreeable vision, from his chair and to his feet, capping one hand to his breast, and staring around him with a mien of fright.

"Off! Back! Out, there!" he ejaculated, brokenly, and grasping the chair as if to repel the attack of a dreaded foe. But his mood subsided immediately, and he added, in a long breath: "I felt its grip here—on my heart—tearing at it. Horrible thing! will it never leave off haunting me? The width of the ocean will not keep it from me. By day I feel it dogging me—by night it rises before me. I am to be haunted forever and forever by this accursed sight—the Spider of Wirthmoor. Goblin—dwarf—devil, give me some peace, or I shall go mad. It was not I who slew your father. Begone, I say!"—and here he took a step toward an imaginary something in the air, waving it back, clutching and striking at it, while he purpled with some terrible frenzy—"Out! Haunt me no longer. I am innocent. The deed was not mine. Hal—you grin—you hiss—I—Bahl 'twas but a nightmare. But, who called? I certainly heard some one call!"

Again he glanced around him, but his manner calmed, the fire died from his eyes.

Just then, too, a footfall was heard in the entry. It approached the library.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "it is Azrak. How long have I been asleep?"—consulting his watch—"two hours nearly. Time enough. Now then for the result of his mission. Ho, Azrak!"

The door opened, and a powerful mulatto entered, pausing inside the sill.

"Azzrak! Azzrak!" cried Ulster, striding forward eagerly, "what news? You have been there? You saw him?—yes, I read it in your face. What news? Quick!"

"I have seen the seer," returned the African, advancing past Hubert Ulster, and seating himself in one of the chairs near the desk.

Ulster's fingers were working and twining with ill-pent eagerness; a great excitement and intense impatience had seized him. He wheeled about and imitated the mulatto, sitting on the edge of the chair, with hands on knees, leaning forward with widened, inquiring eyes.

"Tell me, Azzrak!—haste. You saw Jean Banquo, the artist astrologer. Yes. Well, what then? Speak quick, Azzrak; I am burning to a fever. Do not keep me waiting. His answer—tell me!"

But before we explain what mission it was that Azzrak had performed—the result of which Hubert Ulster was so anxious to hear—we will take a brief survey of the African, and make known the nature of his position in the house of the wealthy banker.

Descended from or connected with the blood of the Ulsters from England—retaining the pride of his ancestors and favored by affluence—Hubert, about ten years prior to the opening of our narrative, had left his queen and his allegiance—being then a lieutenant in the guards—to make America his home; entering at once into the successful career in which we now find him. And concerned in the departure from his native land, and the adoption of strangers' laws, is much of the plot of our story.

In the household of his father and mother—where he had also a brother—in County Sussex, there was employed a negro butler, who had served many years with Grafton Ulster, the father, and occupied the responsible post from the time of the latter's marriage with one Adelaide, the daughter of Hardress Worthington, a broker. This butler had a child named Azzrak, who was two years the senior of Hubert, the eldest child of Grafton and Adelaide Ulster.

From Hubert's boyhood, Azzrak had occupied the position of valet toward him; and an attachment sprung up, mutually, which grew stronger as master and servant grew older, and which accorded to the menial vast privileges.

At the date when Hubert left England—being then in his thirty-first year—Azzrak accompanied him. It was a hasty voyage; in truth, it was a flight, to escape punishment for a deed charged against him by a member of his own family, the guilt of which he vainly denied.

Azzrak was tall and powerful. His dark face

bore the stamp of intelligence; his carriage indicated long association with those whose lives were of culture and whose ways were refined. His bright eyes, set in milky white, contrasting with the deep hued skin, were keen and shrewd in their glance; the expression of his face was one of studied calmness, yet betraying a wary, calculating disposition. When he removed his white slouch hat he exposed a pate as bald as sable marble and glossed like polished ebony; and between the pate and the eyes were brows as slick and narrow as those painted by the pencils of artful belles. His attire was a plain suit of black, a white shirt front, and necktie bowed beneath the collar points.

Slowly rubbing his palms over and over, he steadily returned the gaze of his fidgeting employer.

Hubert Ulster had received in the afternoon preceding this night a note that astounded him, a communication that told him plainly another than he was acquainted with the great secret which had been nurtured in his heart for nearly nine years; the secret bearing on the fact of his occupying that very house, and living, as he did, in such solitude of surrounding. This is the letter:

"No. — MISSISSIPPI AVENUE,
ROOM OF CONSULTATION.

"HUBERT ULSTER:

"In the house where you live, and where lived Eli Ellory before you, there is a closet containing something you wish to find. You have wasted nearly nine years in searching for it, and may waste as many more without my aid. I alone can tell you what you desire to know, and the value of my assistance is one thousand dollars. Hours of audience from 7 till 10 P. M.

JEAN BANQUO,

"Artist and Astrologer."

Upon the reception of this missive, Hubert Ulster had uttered first a shout of derision, and then a not very complimentary expletive.

"Ho! ho! ho! By Jupiter!" he laughed. "A message from this abominable hypocrite, who has dizzied the brains of the credulous, by advertisements and fiddle faddle ever since his arrival in the city of St. Louis. He knows where to find the private closet of Eli Ellory! Hal! hal! hal! That for his mummeries and lies—pooh!" and snapping his fingers disdainfully, he rolled the paper into a ball and tossed it far from him.

But in the same moment, and changing to a sudden soberness, he hurriedly picked up the ball, opened it, and reperused its contents.

"Stay," he muttered; "there may be more in this, after all, than I imagined. How does Jean Banquo know that there is a hidden closet in this house, and where to find it? That's a question. 'Sdeath! How does the astrologer know that I want to find that closet? There's something strange in his knowledge. Now that I think twice upon it, there may be some worth in the message to benefit me. If there is, I shall soon see. Confound the fellow! I will pay heed to his scrawl. Azzrak shall go and hear what he has to communicate," and overcoming his scruples against having dealings with such an individual as Jean Banquo—astrologer, prophet, and spirit medium—he summoned Azzrak, and instructed him to visit the fortune-teller, at No. — Mississippi avenue, with covert inquiries, and carrying the sum of one thousand dollars as the price of the offered information.

It was while awaiting the return of his servant that he had fallen asleep at the desk; and now he could scarce contain himself in his eagerness to hear the result of the visit to Jean Banquo.

"Do not keep me waiting, I say!" reiterated Hubert Ulster, sliding further forward on his chair, and gouging nervously at his knee-caps. "What answer did you get from Jean Banquo?"

"Jean Banquo is very difficult to get at, Master Hubert," said Azzrak, showing two rows of remarkably fine teeth, as he spoke in a voice as smooth and even as a woman's.

"Yes, yes, he is difficult of approach; I know that by the published tales of those who go there. But you saw him. What else?"

"And a man whom I dislike," Azzrak pursued, frowning slightly. "He is a burrowing fox. His house is the gate to a catacomb. To consult with him, one must go to the bowels of the earth. Ugh! I want no more of Jean Banquo."

"Never mind. Your mission? You are tasking me. Tell me of your errand."

"When I rung the bell at his house I was admitted by a girl whose face was blacker than my own.

"You come as the messenger of Hubert Ulster?" she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Then my master will see you. But, first, I must blind you."

"This woman is not of my race, Master Hubert, for I saw beneath one of her ears a white spot, which showed me that her face was dyed, and this spot was the consequence of an oversight. Jean Banquo has a disguised woman in his studio."

"'Sdeath! No matter. To the winds with the disguised woman! You saw Jean Banquo. Now, what did he say? Speak."

"This girl," Azzrak proceeded, in his quiet tone, "blindfolded me, and led me through a narrow hall."

"Hal! she blindfolded you?"

"Out of the light of the studio into darkness, then into light and again into darkness. We descended a staircase which led below the surface of the earth. I knew this for I stretched out my hand, on either side, and touched a wall of masonry that was damp in some places."

"'Sdeath! And this in the home of the astrologer! Go on!" exclaimed Ulster, who listened attentively.

"Once more we emerged into light, and I heard the clicking of springs. Next, my feet trod a floor of stone, and I was commanded to stop. When the bandage was taken from my eyes I stood in a strange place. I stood in the den of the astrologer, Jean Banquo."

"Ah! in the den! Go on. Speak faster, Azzrak."

"All around me were maps and charts, instruments that I had never seen before; the ceiling was full of stars and moons, like brilliant gems, and shapes that I cannot find names for. Glasses, pyramids, parallels, compasses, circles, zones, a thousand singular things were strewn about; and at one side, on a small divan sat Jean Banquo."

"The astrologer himself!" cried Ulster, whose excitement was increasing. "What did he look like, Azzrak?—describe him." He was now on the extreme edge of the chair; one hand was transferred to the desk, and the fingers of the other drummed rapidly on his knee. His body bent the more, and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

"He is a small man—very small, thin and yellow. He wears a beard—which I could see was false—white as drifted snow, and reaching to the waist. Before his low divan was a revolving globe, propelled, anon, by a stick which he held—a stick striped spirally, studded with brass screws that marked certain distances, and surmounted by a death's-head. He wore a turban, the same as the girl who admitted me. I saw that the girl had left me alone with him—"

"Good. Well, what then?" interpolated Ulster, quickly.

"I told Jean Banquo what brought me there. I paid him first; and when he had stowed away the money on his person, he said—"

"He said! Yes, yes—what did he say?" exclaimed the breathless man, hurriedly.

"I see you have the diagram there," said the African, pointing to the paper on the desk. "Pay attention to it, and I will tell you what Jean Banquo said."

Hubert Ulster twirled his chair nearer to the desk. Dashing aside the promiscuous heap of documents, he spread the diagram squarely before him and riveted his eyes on it.

"Now then, Azzrak—now then!"

"Place the thumb of your left hand on the spot marked for the entrance to the first room on the right hand of the stairs, in the third story—being the small room above the garden."

"I have it," doing as directed.

"Bend the first joint to the right, toward the window."

"Done."

"With your other thumb, bend the third joint at a right-angle from the wall, and at its end, which means three times the length of a man—twice to the right and once to the left, from the door—you will find a plug in the floor. Under the plug is a wire, which you are to pull."

"Well! Well! Quick, Azzrak!"

"That is all Jean Banquo said."

"All! 'Sdeath! Why did he not say more? But come—mayhap it is enough. We will look for this plug. Bring the lamp! Come!"

Ulster was not in a humor to delay testing the power of the astrologer.

Folding the scroll, he arose and strode from the room, followed by Azrak, who bore the light.

Along the entry and to the upper story they went; then they entered the room alluded to.

It was a smaller apartment than the others in that story—had no window, but a skylight that served the purpose of ventilation and illumination by day. The walls around were of varnished paneling, the ceiling was bordered and figured, the flooring was of planks of different wood. Not an article of furniture was to be seen, and the room had evidently been long unused, for dust had settled thick on the variegated boards, and the atmosphere was oppressively close.

No sooner had Hubert Ulster thrown open the door and stepped across the sill-strip, than he paused, with a sharp exclamation, and pointed downward.

"Ha! Azrak! Look!—what does that mean? 'Sdeath! some one has been here lately."

Waving the light ahead, they gazed down at the floor, where, amid the layer of dust, they discovered the print of a foot.

The impression appeared to have been made by a tall, thin personage, for the clearly-defined outlines were long, narrow, pointed; and more, the mark was from a slipper or heelless gaiter, as was plain by the unbroken imprint from toe to heel.

"Who has been here?" demanded Ulster, surprised and curious. "There is no man on the premises but ourselves? A thief, beyond doubt. See: it leads this way," and bending over, he followed the mysterious trail across the apartment.

"Here it goes—here, and here. So. Note it, Azrak. The feet of a tall man. Who can be prowling about? And what do they want, eh?"

"Hubert Ulster is a rich banker," replied Azrak; "he may have that in his pocket or about his house which would make a thief rejoice."

"A mistake. I carry no money on my person, and to rob my house a burglar would encounter more danger than he is aware of," and Ulster chuckled with a thought of his own, regarding the way in which he protected his valuables. But he continued: "These marks are fresh. The trail is not a day old, or there would be dust on it. And—ha! it is gone!"

The tracks ended abruptly before the paneled wall, and Ulster turned upon his companion in astonishment.

"Aarak, whoever entered here has gone through this wall. Quick! let us search for the plug, according to the directions of Jean Banquo. The closet we seek may be in this very spot," and as he spoke fast, he hammered on the panel with his clinched fist. But there was no hollowness of sound, indicative of a space beyond; and he exclaimed, in the same breath: "It seems to be solid enough—curse it! I have tried every panel in this room a dozen times, in my search for the private closet of Eli Ellory, and am ready to swear it cannot be here. Ah! have you found anything, Azrak?"

The African had set the lamp near the door, and was closely scanning the planks—measuring distances with his keen eyes, while his employer stood thumping uselessly on the wall. Ulster's quick inquiry was caused by a word from Azrak, who presently stooped down and drew out his penknife.

"Ha! you have it! Good! The plug! Jean Banquo is a wonderful man. I have derided his follies; but if he proves honest in this, I may patronize him liberally. For nearly nine years I have hunted for the closet. It contains that which will enrich us—I say 'us,' Azrak. The slip we found between the mattresses of his death-bed tells me that. Draw the light. Let me take the knife, Azrak."

Azrak brought up the light, and Ulster went to work with the knife.

The two men knelt absorbedly over a small plug, not more than an inch in diameter, which was so smoothly inserted in the floor, that, without the instructions of the mysterious Jean Banquo, it might easily have escaped the observation of any one, however careful their hunt.

"It is the key to the private doings of Eli Ellory," muttered Hubert Ulster, more to himself, digging, cutting and boring at the plug, "and the key is tightly fitted. Curse the knife!"—as the bright, slender blade snapped—"it is broken."

Opening a fresh blade, he resumed his exer-

tions. The plug was fast disappearing under the sharp edge of steel; presently he drew a long breath, and lowered his face almost to the floor. The plug was out.

"The light, Azrak!—hold it close to my head; so. Ah! I see it. A gleaming wire. We have it. Now, Jean Banquo said, 'pull the wire!'"

"Pull the wire," echoed Azrak, lowly, and nodding his bald head.

Running a finger into the hole, Ulster locked the joint around the wire, and pulled vigorously upward.

"Look around, Azrak—look around. What do you see?"

"Nothing," said Azrak.

Ulster pulled the wire a second time, and repeated:

"Look around, Azrak—look now."

"Master Hubert," whispered the African.

"What do you see now, Azrak?" interrogated Ulster, giving the wire a third pull.

"Cease, cease," answered the mulatto, huskily, while the lamp in his hand quivered slightly, and his eyes stared over Ulster's shoulder. "Let go the wire: the closet is open. Glance behind you."

The large panel, against which the mysterious footprints ended, and which was directly behind Hubert Ulster, had swung outward noiselessly, exposing a high, narrow compartment, apparently cased with iron, filled with shelving, books, pigeon-holes, drawers, and looking awfully dark and spectral in the dim rays of the lamp.

But it was not the mere fact of the discovery that startled Azrak, and caused his voice to sink tremulously.

Just inside the rim of the door stood a repulsive shape, a half-human, half-unearthly being, seemingly a man hardly four feet high, attired from head to gaiter in black, with a short cape lapped over one shoulder. His face was the visage of a fiend, yellow, dark, set with glaring orbs, shaggy brows, a few bristling hairs on the pointed chin, and wearing a savage, wolfish expression. From under the cape, reaching fully to the knees, were dangling arms terminating in brown, hairy hands, one of which held a cone-fashioned hat; and above the cape, over the low forehead and around the prominent ears, a mass of raven-hued and tangled locks grew neglectedly. Beneath the broadened nostrils was an impish grin, that displayed irregular, projecting, discolored teeth; and like a hewn statue, devilish and frightful, it confronted them.

Obedying the words of the African, Ulster turned to look. Simultaneously he sprang up and backward, as if from a nest of hissing, stinging serpents.

"The Spider! The Spider!" he cried, in terror—and reeled, as if stricken a blow, into the arms of Azrak.

In the same moment the door swung shut on its concealed hinges, burying the hideous thing, and restoring the wall to its former apparent solidity. And from the depths of the wall, dully sepulchral, came a voice that laughed hollowly and said:

"Remember the deed in the Labyrinth!—the deed in the Labyrinth!"

Azrak shook the limp form of his employer.

"Master Hubert! Rouse!" he urged.

But Ulster had swooned from some overwhelming terror; he heard neither the voice from the wall, nor the call of his servitor.

And while striving to resuscitate him, the African fancied that he heard a noise of lightly pattering feet in the hall outside—almost instantly followed by a piercing shriek, a shriek from female lips, that rung in wild, frightened echoes through the house.

"That is the voice of Francois!" muttered Azrak. "And that is the cry of the Spider!"—as a loud, chattering laugh ensued close upon the scream, ending in a wail. "The accursed being still pursues my master for the deed in the Labyrinth. It chills even my blood!"

He was rigidly motionless, as he sustained the helpless body of Hubert Ulster, keeping his eyes riveted on the doorway, and listening intently.

Again came the sound of pattering feet, distant and receding on the stairway; then all was hushed.

CHAPTER II THE SPHINX.

On the same night, at the same hour of the transaction of the singular and significant tableau in the home of Hubert Ulster, another

scene was progressing within a building on Pratte avenue, only a short distance from the present site of the track of the Missouri railroad.

A house three stories in height, with a brilliantly illuminated restaurant at the pavement entrance. Adjoining the restaurant doorway, was a private entrance leading to the second floor, and thither we go.

The exterior of the building was darkened and unattractive, save the glare of the restaurant below; but behind the fastened blinds and thick curtains, effectually concealed from a casual observer, bright lights were burning, and numerous voices buzzed lowly.

The room was long and wide; its furnishing was ordered in magnificence. Along the side opposite the massive, grained door, were alcoves, curtained and exclusive—corniced, glittering, flashy. Tables, large and small, inlaid for chess, or of plain, smooth marble, were arranged about, and rich sofas and chairs invited to a seat of elegance and luxury. There were sideboards, displaying massive silver, bottles, pitchers and goblets—presided over by Africans, vases of flowers on brackets and stands; a vine clad balcony at the rear overlooking a private garden of rare culture.

But it was not the ladies' refreshment saloon, attached to the restaurant, as might be supposed, nor the reception hall of a wealthy family, as its appearance might indicate; and we have simply to study its contents still further to ascertain its true character.

At the far end was a large table with a raised center, covered with green baize, on which were glued a number of cards, face up; on another side was a table still larger, where sat a man turning an egg-shaped contrivance that ejected tiny balls—each ball numbered, and the figures called in rapid succession; and again, there was a round stand with banded edge and cased top, inlaid with a semi circular row of figures from 1 to 6, where a man tossed dice and handled chips with alacrity. The first, faro; the second, keno; the third, the "western improved sweat clock"—all well patronized. For the apartment was crowded, and its occupants recked little of the dismal night without.

In short, a gambling hall, patronized by men and women, the latter at the tables or at a game of cards. The women—we make a note of it—were masked closely—a dressing room for their use being provided. A husband might meet his wife, or a brother his sister, unknowingly, at the general play, or in the alcoves, where couples were absorbedly engaged at the moment; and these *habitués* were attired in raiments of splendor, loaded with dazzling jewelry, betting and staking with an ardor equaling the heat and excitement of the men.

An establishment of ruin unknown to the mild-habited business community of St. Louis.

Seated in one of the alcoves was a tall, handsome Spaniard. He had laid aside his hat, and his dark, glossy hair puffed fancifully about his head. In one hand he held a pack of cards, round which his ringed fingers coiled, and which he rapped listlessly on the marble slab, while with the other hand he uneasily twirled a slim goatee until the hair came to a long, needle-like point.

The curtains of the alcove were drawn back, and from the interior—where a lamp on a bracket rayed and illuminated round—the Spaniard's eyes, coal-black and shining under slightly knit brows, were riveted expectantly on the door.

"Who is that man?" inquired a patron of the establishment, nudging one more acquainted.

"He? Oh, it is Coco Vargas."

"And who is Coco Vargas?"

"Suppose you ask the gentleman himself—I cannot tell you more."

"But is he a stranger in the city? Has he no business?"

"He may be at his sole business now, for all I know—sitting there with a pack of cards, and watching for somebody to cheat. He was first noticed about the time Jean Banquo came to St. Louis—you have heard of Jean Banquo, artist and astrologer?"

"Frequently. I have even visited his art gallery, on Mississippi avenue."

"Well, some assert that Vargas and this charlatan are acquainted, for he is observed to go there at all hours and often. Coco Vargas may be seen at most any one of the hotels, in the daytime, lounging idly as if he had a gold mine to support him; and at night, look for

him among the gambling saloons—more lately here. He must have other means of support than his dexterity at cards, for I have never seen him win a cent."

"A handsome fellow. But there's considerable 'devil' in his glance," said the stranger, who was covertly scrutinizing the object of their remarks.

"True," assented the other, "rather too much devil for his superior physique. Temper and strength combined are somewhat dangerous. He has already stabbed one man and shot another—the last in this very saloon. He did not try to *kill*; only a passing hint to beware of his wrath. He makes no acquaintances; at which I am not surprised—ha! ha! ha! But you seem to be curious about him?"

"Judging by what I see," the stranger half interrupted, "you are mistaken. Coco Vargas is pretty well acquainted *there*," and he pointed toward the Spaniard, who had risen suddenly and was striding from the alcove.

Vargas had been intently watching the door, as if expecting some one. The revel around him contained no interest, apparently; and his mind seemed devoted to one sole thought, the thought an anticipation of an arrival.

The clock in the room had just struck the early hour, when the door was flung wide, and a female entered. Like the others of her sex congregated there, she was masked. Her dress was a gorgeous suit of blue silk, exquisitely patterned; point-lace undersleeves; white lace shawl; jewelry of pearls and diamonds; and round the bare arms, drooping voluptuously from the tassel-fringed angel-sleeves, were costly bracelets, glittering, like the rings on her fingers, with large gems. The mask she wore was of spangled blue, and around and above the mask was a wealth of glorious hair, and in the eyelets of the mask were eyes that shone like a pair of twinkling stars.

As she appeared, there was a buzz of admiration from the men; the women glanced at her in silent envy.

"The blue mask again!" exclaimed several.

"Yes. And see; Coco Vargas has been waiting for her. Poor fool that he is! she beats him every time."

Vargas advanced quickly to her side. She did not appear to notice him or be aware of his presence, until a hand tapped her smartly on the bare shoulder and the deep voice of the Spaniard fell on her ears.

"*Caramba!* At last, madame!"

"Ah! it is my friend the Spaniard," half laughed the blue mask, turning upon him composedly.

"Yes—your 'friend' the Spaniard. Satisfaction, madame!—satisfaction is what I want, and satisfaction I will have."

"Indeed! But Coco Vargas has monopolized me every evening for a month—"

"And you have won his money at every game—*caramba!* Come. To the cards."

"Oh, very well," consented the melodious voice behind the mask; "if you *must* have your 'satisfaction'—ha! ha! ha! ha! proceed, Coco Vargas. I will beat you again to-night, depend upon it."

"We shall see about that," wheeling short around.

And as Vargas led the way to the alcove, there was a strange, scowling look in his dark face; his white teeth were showing, and between the teeth he gritted:

"A thousand deaths on you! do you think I care for the money, when what I seek is worth a fortune? I believe I know you, that I have found you—Favia Claremont—the Sphinx!—the being with a woman's face and beauty, and the body, the heart, the boldness of a lion, who stabbed me in Cairo, who eluded me in Atfeh, who defied me in Alexandria, and on whom I have vowed a terrible vengeance. Curse you, if you are Favia Claremont!—and if you are not she, curse you for deceiving me by seeming like her! To-night your mask comes off. If you are Favia Claremont! *caramba!* I shall kill you!"

When the two had disappeared into the alcove, drawing the curtains tight, the players in the room assumed their own affairs.

The keno-wheel flew round; the faro-box opened a fresh deal; the dice rattled gayly; additional couples strayed to the long windows at the balcony, engrossed in pretty speeches and a contemplation of the drizzly blackness outside. For the place was not without its element of flirtation; and only a few weeks previous, a married man had unmasked his

wife at *tete-a-tete* with a sporting character, a dashing major mustachios.

Scarce ten minutes had expired, when a thump was heard in the direction of the alcove, accompanied by the voice of Coco Vargas, who was heard to exclaim, angrily:

"*Caramba!*"

Then a rippling, melodious laugh—a laugh that was tantalizing in its tenor, and which seemed to say:

"Did I not tell you, Coco Vargas, that I would again beat you? Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

Then ensued a lengthy silence in the vicinity. For over an hour not another sound issued from the alcove, save, now and then, a jingle of coin.

"He is losing heavily now," suggested one.

"Of course. Nobody, if sensible, will play a second evening with the blue mask. She has Satan at her elbow for luck," whispered another.

The business of the evening was destined to an abrupt termination.

While the excitement of gaming was at its height—brows fevered, eyes starting, and perspiration trickling from the faces of unlucky betters—the assemblage was startled by a pistol crack.

A sharp, loud explosion rung through the room, and men and women sprung to their feet in alarm.

Almost blending in the sound came a short scream, a cry of pain.

"Who is shot? Who fired that?" was asked and echoed from lip to lip.

And simultaneously, the answer:

"It was this way—in the alcove. Coco Vargas and the blue mask!"

"Coco Vargas and the blue mask!" was taken up by a dozen voices.

Instantly, all was confusion. In a mass, they poured toward the alcove.

Tearing aside the curtain, the crowd paused—first, because they suddenly conceived the idea that another barrel might be emptied among *them*; and second, because the sight they saw was strange and fearful, as it burst upon them within a little cloud of bluish smoke that floated out.

Half the body of the woman lay prone across the table, the head jerked to one side, toward them—one hand, gripping a knife, reaching over the furthest edge of the table, the mask torn from her face, and a red, bleeding wound disfiguring her forehead.

Evidently, she had struck across at Coco Vargas, about the same time that he delivered his shot—missed her aim, caught the polished steel under the edge of the slab, where, rigid in her insensibility, perhaps death, the grasp on the handle of the blade retained her body in the position in which they found her.

"The wretch has murdered her!" cried one of the masked females, fiercely.

"Can she be dead?"

"And where is the Spaniard?"

"Ay, the murderer!—catch the murderer!"

But Coco Vargas had vanished. Though they searched for him with their eyes, the perpetrator of the deed was not to be seen.

"Here is a ring," said a man, picking up a circlet of gold with a heavy setting; and then he enunciated, in surprise: "Look here! Look here! What an outlandish miniature!"

The setting of the ring was divided, and as he picked it up, it flew open, exhibiting a human head, minutely pictured—wolfish, ferocious, unearthly—a *fac-simile of the visage worn by the apparition that appeared in the closet in the house of Hubert Ulster!*

One of the two—Coco Vargas or the blue mask—had dropped the ring; and whichever it was, he or she must know something of the hideous being which Hubert Ulster had called The Spider.

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING OF JEAN BANQUO.

ABOUT one year prior to the night gone, the citizens of St. Louis had been notified, through copious advertisements in the newspapers, and eye-catching handbills, of the arrival in their midst of a famed artist from the East, whose gallery of exhibition would be thrown open to the public immediately, and in conjunction with an audience-chamber for fortune-telling.

These advertisements were attractive and mysterious, announcing the advent of Jean Banquo—a descendant of the seventh son of one of seven seers, the first of which had painted samples of the fields, forests, temples and cor-

ridors of heaven with a brush, guided in a dream, by whispers from Mohammed Ali—a man possessing superior sight of the universe; a knowledge of human hearts, lives, ambitions, probable successes or ultimate fates; endowed with the faculty of divulging buried secrets; having lectured, exhibited and practiced in Persia and Arabia; traversed and preached from Alexandria to the White Nile, audienced within the halls of the monarchs or among the tribes of the deserts on earth, and called down the favors of spirits below and above the earth, and studied the pathways of the heavens beyond the clouds; talismaned by the Grisgris of the Marabuts, instructed by the scul of Inman Abubeker, and whose name was known in the horoscopes of the Chinese of the East, the Mexicans of the West, the Egyptians of the South, and the Scythians of the North.

At first the astrologer was poorly patronized. The minds of a civilized people were too far advanced to be imposed upon by the professions of this miracle-proclaiming mortal; but gradually the lower classes had ventured a coin to test the abilities of the prophet, and many were awed by a fulfillment of his declarations.

Whether it was chance, or a prior knowledge of circumstances—or, if neither, whether the man's asserted acquirements in Dæmonology had indeed some foundation not yet comprehended by the intellects of the nineteenth century—that brought about doings or sayings which he foretold accurately, it was nevertheless true that they transpired according to his order, and, being translated, resulted in his gaining a foothold among those too easily deluded by his rigmaroles.

In a short time he became celebrated in certain directions, and people were heard to exclaim:

"What is all this about Jean Banquo? Everybody is talking of Jean Banquo! Whence came the oracle? Have you seen him? Direct me to his place—I must look at this wonderful man. I too will test the power of Jean Banquo; and I think I have a riddle for his brain that will defy him."

Hence it was that in the space of a year Jean Banquo had arisen from obscurity to fame—eclipsing the horde of ordinary fortune-tellers, mediums and charlatans that, to this date, deceive, cheat and astound the credulous who are snared by clap trap advertisements. His rooms were visited by numbers daily, who went there to gaze on the pictures and paintings of marvelous beauty that adorned the walls, spending an hour or so in the gallery, admiring its rich furnishings, or viewing the products of his own masterly brush.

From the small coins of the poor he doubled to the gold pieces of the rich; men and women wealthy and influential, bought of him, or secretly interviewed him in regard to business speculations, love intrigues, domestic troubles, and absent friends.

But the artist and astrologer was never seen in person, either in the gallery or on the street, nor could he be seen at all, except in the same manner as that described by Azrak—the party desiring audience being blindfolded and led by an intricate route to a chamber which instinct alone discovered to be below the surface of the earth.

A few words will describe him: a man hardly four feet high, attired in a flowing robe of costly material and fancifully blended colors; wearing a broad crimson sash with gold fringe, a turban that appeared monstrous on the head of one so small in stature, and the sandals of a Lew Chervian; whose eyes were tiny, glancing from their depths a nature of cunning, power, passion, or, perhaps, wickedness. His face was softened by some wash that produced clearness of complexion and deceptive bloom, and from his ears over the outer lines of the cheeks, down to his waist, was a snow-white beard, false, but admirably arranged. Though diminutive in height, there was a sign of muscular strength in the broad shoulders and chest, and his whole appearance and bearing were calculated to inspire with the outlandish awe of his vocation.

The establishment was constantly in charge of a negress seemingly about thirty years of age, dressed in the richness of an oriental costume, which—with a face molded strangely handsome for one of her race, and a voice wonderfully musical, and a degree of intelligence that could not fail to be remarked upon—drew no little observation from those whom she entertained in explaining the singular le-

gends attached to the still more singular paintings of her master, Jean Banquo.

Between the hours of four and five in the afternoon—being the day of September 20—the gallery was unusually crowded, and Girasa, the negress, was very busy, both at sale and with descriptions of what excited comment. The weather was clear and fine despite the dismal prospects of the night before, and the hall of the artist wore a brilliancy exceeding its wont.

Suddenly the girl started. Two more visitors had entered, and were standing near the door. Hubert Ulster and his servitor, Azrak.

Ulster had never been there till now, as the reader knows, and he paused enraptured with the beautiful panoramic scenery around him—pictures unlike the ordinary canvas productions of most painters, and blending the alternating grandeurs of the old masters and of masters of later fame; statuary, animals, with here and there a representation of heavenly phenomena or mythologic allegory, more likely the creation of imaginative genius.

Hubert Ulster was fond of art. He glanced at the arabesques, the gorgeous furnishings, the soft, curiously woven carpet beneath his feet, the mellow-shaded skylights, the couples and groups that, like himself, were drinking the lovely vision, or strolling by the curtained windows, or seated upon the luxurious sofas—and then he glanced at Girasa, the negress.

It was in the same moment he fastened his eyes upon her that she perceived the pair; and a quick, scarce perceptible tremor passed over her, as she evaded his gaze, continuing her talk with a lady and gentleman who were purchasing a flowery painting of "The Vale of Cashmere."

"Hist, Azrak!" whispered Ulster, grasping the arm of his follower and squeezing it tightly; "do you see that girl yonder?"

"Yes. It is Girasa, the attendant and hostess for Jean Banquo. She it was who conducted me to him last night, when I came on your errand—"

"And you told me you believed her to be a white woman in disguise?"

"I have no doubt of that, Master Hubert," replied Azrak, also looking toward the negress, as if endeavoring to pierce the disguise which, he felt convinced, she wore.

"Look closer, Azrak. By Heaven! her form, her attitudes of grace all seem very familiar to me. Mark the easy movement of her hands as she points out places in the canvas—see how smooth her manners—she engages her listeners with hardly an effort. Now she consummates a sale—Did you note her courtesy?—'twas regal—I have seen the same before, I can swear. Where have I met this woman, when she had not the dye on her face?"

"Perhaps you are mistaken," said the African.

"Ah! she comes this way," interrupted Ulster, following the negress with a glance of strange intensity.

Having disposed of the costly painting, Girasa was ostensibly on her way to arrange for its removal to the lower door, where Jean Banquo invariably had two men with wagons to transport the purchases of his patrons.

In passing the pair she half-averted her face. But ere she had gone by, Hubert Ulster, acting on an involuntary impulse, stepped forward, and laid a hand detainingly on her arm.

"Stay—a moment—I—"

"In a few minutes—directly," answered Girasa, cutting him short, and quickening her walk; and there was an accent of uneasiness, almost a tone of fear, in the hastily-uttered words.

Ulster, with hand raised to where the arm of the bodice had slipped through his fingers, and eyes set wide, stared after her receding figure until she disappeared into a sort of alcove-room at the further end of the long saloon.

"Master Hubert," spoke Azrak, lowly, and plucking at his elbow, "people are watching you. Let us be moving, like others."

Aroused by his servitor's whisper, Ulster wheeled short around, and the two mingled leisurely with the rest.

"You are right, Azrak; that woman is no negress. With the dye washed off she would be beautiful to look upon. But so familiar!" half-pausing and casting a look back over his shoulder. "That I have seen her in the past, with a white face, I am certain enough to stake my life. Can it be that others beside our-

selves have penetrated this secret of Jean Banquo's?"

"Hardly so. It would be soon rumored outside. Let us go this way, Master Hubert. Here is where Jean Banquo consults the stars."

They ascended a short stairway which led to a sort of cupola, or observatory, where an extended view of the city could be had east and south, and where they saw numerous astronomical instruments, including a massive telescope.

Hubert Ulster had not come idly to the home of the astrologer; he had a purpose—but we leave him here to follow the movements of Girasa, who did not go at once to secure the wagon, nor to the front of the house at all.

Her actions were mysterious when within the alcove, having drawn shut the thick curtains in the archway. The interior of this separate apartment had one large picture representing the "Feast of the Roses," which completely covered that portion of the wall fronting the entrance; and in this wall, concealed by the picture, was a narrow door, to be reached by swinging out the picture on hinges, the existence of which would not be suspected.

Vanishing through this door—the painting settling back to its former position, owing to a slant of the well-oiled hinges—the negress gained access to a room that had neither door, window nor skylight, but was lighted by a lamp that depended from a wire and hook in the ceiling. Directly beneath the lamp was a square hole in the floor, and down the hole was a carpeted staircase leading to a second room that, like the first, was doorless, windowless, lighted by a hanging lamp. Another flight of stairs from this apartment led to the cellar—and in the cellar there were more stairs descending into the earth, built of thick timber, walled on both sides by solid masonry. This third and last flight ended upon a stone-floored passageway, or subterranean corridor, very narrow, very dark, for its only light was a third and smaller lamp that burned on a bracket beside a door some distance ahead.

And this was the mode of ingress to the audience chamber of Jean Banquo, artist and astrologer, who employed every feasible means to weave mystery into his profession, and who was appropriately termed—by those who had interviewed him, and who, like Azrak, readily perceived that they were conducted to a vault far below the surface of the earth, deeper than the deepest cellar in St. Louis—Jean Banquo, the gnome—a gnome because of his diminutive size and burrowing propensity.

Girasa sped onward until she stood before the door, and here she gave three distinct raps.

Her knock was answered by the gnome, who exclaimed when he saw her:

"Ha! Girasa! what means this? It is unusual for you to disturb me during the day. I am busy, too, at the veiled picture. Speak—you are excited—what brought you here?"

For the negress was panting, and there was a restless look in her large, brilliant brown eyes.

"I have cause to be excited!" she gasped. "The worst enemy we have in the world is at this minute among the visitors in the gallery. I fear he has already recognized me!"

CHAPTER IV.

PISTOL AND KNIFE.

WE go back to the night of September 19, to the fashionable gambling-saloon on Pratte avenue, to an explanation of the bloody tableau in the alcove.

It will be seen that Coco Vargas and the blue mask had been playing together at cards for a month of successive nights—he losing heavily each night, yet persistently striving, to all appearances, to recover his lost money.

The many frequenters of the place were divided into three opinions regarding Coco Vargas: the first, that he was a fool; the second, an admiration of his pluck; the third, a wonderment as to where he procured the inexhaustible funds to carry on these games, which invariably drained his pocket of large sums—for the bulletin of gossip said Vargas was the greatest loser, and the blue mask the greatest winner, of any two among them all.

But it is very easy to infer, from his mutterings as he led the way to the alcove, and the unconcealed hatred burning in his coal-black eyes as he turned his back upon her—that Vargas had an object in playing every night with this sole personage, that he cared little

for his losses, that he planned to unmask his successful opponent, whom he believed to be an enemy—a woman who had stabbed him in Cairo, eluded him in Atfeh, defied and outwitted him in Alexandria, and finally escaped from Egypt while he was trailing her in pursuance of an oath of vengeance, the primal cause of which, and the circumstances attached to it, will be detailed in due time.

Seating themselves at the table, and agreeing upon the stake, they "cut" for deal, which turned in favor of the woman.

"A 'point' against you already, Coco Vargas?" she laughed. "Or, if you choose, I will take the 'point' and give you the deal. Eh?"

"You waste time, madam—deal them out. We shall see about the point."

He was regarding her covertly; but as well to try to impierce the visage of a statue as to imagine the expression of the face behind the mask; only the eyes—dark, brilliant, fascinating, alternating glances at the cards and at the Spaniard—flashed unreadably from the spangled screen.

The game began. By turns, fortune fluctuated, till the count stood even.

The mask dealt again, then showed her "hand," containing the two bowers and an ace of trumps.

"You see, Coco Vargas, I have beaten you!"

"At eucher, yes," thought the Spaniard; "but there is another game at which I will be victor presently, you sphinx!" And aloud: "Stake, madam. Come, it is my deal!"

The second, the third, the fourth games were played. It seemed as if the demon of card-luck stood beside the mask; she swept in the glittering coin and crisp notes with unbroken regularity.

Coco Vargas became very silent. His black orbs were burning like kindling coals, and his gaze, unperceived by her, was fixed with a fierce intensity upon that spangled mask, like the glare of some ravenous animal measuring the distance between itself and an intended prey. A scowl like the ragged edges of a thunder-cloud wrinkled his brow; his lips were compressed till his slim goatee stood out straight from the chin.

"Caramba! your luck is remarkable; but I think you have learned to 'stack' the cards. Did you ever see *that* trick in the East?" and with the last, he euchered her while she held the "right," the "left," and the "king."

"In the East?" she repeated, apparently not observing that his remark was merely an adroit introduction of a subject.

"Yes. I think you have been in Alexandria."

"Why do you think so?"

"And in Atfeh," he added, ignoring her inquiring answer.

"Perhaps. To become experienced, one must travel."

Travel?—no doubt of it. I have traveled a great deal. I have been in Alexandria, in Atfeh; I was once in Cairo. Were you ever in Cairo?" quick and sharp, and his eyes lighted fiercely.

"You are curious, Coco Vargas. Now, why do you wish to know whether I was at Cairo, Egypt, or Canton, China, or Petersburg, Russia, or elsewhere? What is it to you?"

"A great deal," he hissed, in a voice of passion, rising suddenly, and leaning across the table. "I think I know you. You are Favia Claremont—who stabbed me in Cairo, eluded me in Atfeh, and intrapped me in Alexandria. Look; see this ring. Do you know that face?" and as he cried the fierce words in a hissing whisper, he displayed a ring which he had taken from his vest pocket, with the set opened and hideous contents laid bare—the ring that was afterward found by the alarmed gamblers.

At the sight of the ring, the woman uttered a low cry, and sprung from her chair.

"Ho! I knew it!" cried Vargas, grasping the mask and tearing it rudely from her face; "Favia Claremont! Sphinx! You are cornered at last! I am here for revenge! Take that for the stab you gave me in Cairo!"

A pistol blazed in his hand—and none too soon; for simultaneously she flashed forth a dagger and struck desperately at him, missing her intended mark and falling rigidly over the marble slab.

Coco Vargas ensconced himself in the folds of the curtain, close to the wall forming one side of the entrance; and as the crowd surged in, absorbed by the terrible vision that greeted them,

he slipped out, and had passed the grained door before the excited mass of men and women thought to inquire for him.

On the street, he sped swiftly away. He paid no heed to the drizzling rain; and as he went, he clinched his huge fists, frowned savagely, muttered in a deep breath:

"My bullet pierced her forehead. *Caramba!* she is dead. For eleven years I have been after her—now the account is square. Satan devour her soul! I am revenged! Coco Vargas is revenged! That is the last of Favia Claremont!"

Along Pratte to Chouteau avenue, thence to Mississippi avenue, then to the right down the last named street.

The hour was late, and the night was dark. There was an air of loneliness in his surrounding; the wind had changed and was blowing briskly, beating the rain unpleasantly against his face. But Coco Vargas had no thought then for the fact that he was expensively dressed, badly exposed, and being fast wet through to the skin.

Pretty soon he halted before a two-story building resembling a warehouse, the back of which extended onto another property, the sides of which were without windows—as could be noticed, owing to a space between it and other houses on either side—and the front of which was darkened and gloomy. The art gallery of the astrologer, Jean Banquo.

The house for consultation with the astrologer had passed, and he was supposed to be asleep after a day and night of harvest.

But Coco Vargas did not come there, like others, to consult with Jean Banquo, nor did the fact of the door being locked prevent his gaining admittance. He produced a key, and fitting it to the dead latch, entered the doorway, vanishing in the murk of the hall.

Advancing with the confidence of a man who knows his ground, he paused at a closet door beneath the stairs. To this he gained access by touching a spring, and continued down a spiral staircase to the cellar. In one of the walls of the cellar, he touched another spring—which he found after groping about for several minutes, and which swung open a large stone block made to resemble two smaller stones, like the surrounding masonry of the foundation—and passing through the ingeniously-contrived opening, he stood in the next cellar, where was the stone descent to the subterranean passage that led to the massive door which shut off the chamber almost constantly occupied by Jean Banquo.

Guided, now, by the swinging lamp above, and next by the lamp on the bracket ahead, he proceeded rapidly. A few seconds more, and he rapped thrice on the door, the signal of the only two persons who knew the astrologer intimately; Coco Vargas, and Girasa, the negress.

The door was opened by the gnome, who had in one hand a brush, and in the other a pallet, and who craned his neck forward as if doubting who it was.

"Ha! Coco Vargas!"

"*Caramba!* Yes."

"And bareheaded! What is the meaning of this?"

"I dropped my hat in the 'dark cellar,' and could not find it." Vargas strode into the vaulted chamber, and sat down on an ottoman—watching Jean Banquo, who was refastening the door, and taking off his saturated coat at the same time.

"You are wet, Vargas," said the astrologer, turning to the Spaniard. "Something has happened—I know that by the scowl on your face."

"I have slain her!" exclaimed Vargas, striking his knee a thump, and glaring at the gnome.

"Slain her!" echoed Jean Banquo, not seeming to comprehend immediately; and then: "Do you mean to say you have found her?—Favia Claremont, the Sphinx? Hey, Vargas?"

"Found her and slain her, I tell you! *Caramba!* I shot her to-night—the woman who stabbed me in Cairo, and who made a tool of you, to destroy me, when she found I was alive and after her. She is dead!" and he wound up his speech with another thump on his knee.

"Good! Good!" cried Banquo, laying aside his brush and pallet, and, also, his usual dignity. "Right good, Coco Vargas—right good!" and he rubbed his hands gayly. "Your errand is over, then. Mine will soon be. The picture is nearly completed, the Spider of

Wirthmoor will, ere long, seize its prey. Ha! ha! ha!" and he grew more merry. "But, tell me: how did you find her—the Sphinx—the beautiful woman with a lion's heart, and the boldness of a bandit?" and the gnome finally sat down on a cushioned stool, looking up into the dark countenance of Coco Vargas, with impish eyes glittering and twinkling like the orbs of a serpent.

Vargas told, with some excitement, how for the period of a month, he had been playing at cards with the blue mask, whom he took to be—from the night of their first meeting in the gambling saloon, when his suspicions were aroused instantly on hearing her voice—the woman who had stabbed him, at a date eleven years before, and on whom he had sworn to wreak vengeance.

Showing that Coco Vargas and Jean Banquo were on exceeding intimacy, and that the deeds of one interested the other peculiarly. And we may add, here, that the two had settled in St. Louis to carry out mutual plans. Together, they had excavated beneath the building—which they bought—removing the dirt by cunning transportation, creating, in one year, or less, the secret doors, stairways subterraneous passages and chambers carefully arranged to prevent caving in, and ventilated by well-hidden interstices; besides walling up the side-windows of the first and second floors which might discover that there were rooms beyond the store-room below or the saloon above, both of which had been walled artificially—the whole to be used ultimately in destroying a foe of Jean Banquo's, because of a tragedy enacted in County Sussex, England—whose story will soon be told.

"But—*caramba!*—I am a murderer!" suddenly exclaimed Vargas, breaking short upon their conversation. "They will catch me and hang me. I may swing for the assassination of this Favia Claremont. Furies of thunder! I did not count on that. I have not the desert to flee upon—a tribe of Arabs to defend me for money. How am I to escape?"

"Have no fears," answered Banquo. "What! would you flee before I accomplish my task?"

"No—*caramba!*" and inwardly: "Besides when I go, I cannot go without my beloved Francoise. How could I leave her? Abominable predicament! And to-morrow night I am to see her again." All this very quick in his brain; then aloud: "I will stay with you, Banquo, till Hubert Ulster pays the penalty of his deed in the Labyrinth."

"And I will conceal you till it is safe for us to depart—to England—to Egypt—to the sands of the Nubian, where we shall be safe and satisfied in our vengeance—our vengeance, Coco Vargas!"

"*Caramba!* yes; our vengeance. But I will go to bed now. I am sleepy. More of this to-morrow. I shall slumber soundly to-night!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the gnome, who understood.

Vargas crossed the chamber and pushed aside some heavy curtains, beyond which was another and smaller apartment, furnished comfortably and containing two beds.

"Good-night there, Jean Banquo," called the Spaniard, as he undressed and threw himself on one of the beds.

"Good-night—good-night," answered the astrologer, who resumed his painting on a large canvas, so large that he was obliged to stand on a platform at times—a picture that was, as we shall see, to play a part in the schemes of Jean Banquo.

It was already the work of many months, a tedious labor that had engaged him far into the night, when St. Louis was silent in slumber. During the hours in which he gave audience to those silly ones who sought his advice and placed reliance on his counsels, the picture was kept thickly veiled; and people little imagined the tragedy that was brewing, which Jean Banquo meant should be a mystery to astonish and bewilder the business community, and baffle the agents of the law.

Once, the artist paused in his labors, and advanced to another pair of draping curtains opening into a third chamber. Within this apartment, Girasa was sleeping peacefully on a luxurious couch.

Jean Banquo gazed in upon the slumberer for some time; then he muttered, returning to the monstrous easel, and shaking his head till his long beard swayed jerkily from side to side:

"Poor girl!—poor, heart-broken thing. And

Hubert Ulster still lives, after striking gall into the sweetest fountain of her soul! No matter: let us wait. I wonder if he will find repose to-night? It is the first time he has seen the Spider since it confronted him in the Labyrinth, ten years ago. The next time they meet, Hubert Ulster *will die!*" and as he muttered the last, in a snaky hiss, Jean Banquo's eyes shone with a terrible tigerish light above the white hairs of his enormous false beard.

CHAPTER V.

DEATH AT THE FRONT.

AND now let us return to that room in the third story of Hubert Ulster's house at the moment when Azrak caught the terror-stricken, fainting form of his employer, when he heard the scream of a female, and recognized the voice as that of Francoise, the niece of the banker, and listened to the pattering, retreating footsteps of one whom—by his wailful cry, his recent presence, yet unaccountable exit from the secret compartment, his words of warning and his horrible features—he knew to be the Spider of Wirthmoor, a being that Hubert Ulster had good cause to dread, and whose existence was a nightmare, an incubus, a ghastly presence that had made his life miserable, by the force of a vivid recollection of some fearful association connected with it, ever since the date of his hurried flight from England.

The banker's unconsciousness was hardly more than momentary—a swoon, such as his was, from sudden fright, being unlike the effect of a blow from the fist, which, by its jar of concussion, produces actual cessation of animation—and in a few seconds he was again standing, though dizzy, bewildered, with hands pressed hard to his throbbing temples.

"Master Hubert," spoke Azrak gently.

"Oh, haunt me no longer—begone!" moaned Ulster, as if, in his half-swimming vision, he still saw the unearthly form that had confronted them in the wall.

"We are alone," said the African, soothingly. "Calm yourself, Master Hubert."

Ulster slowly raised his bowed head and glanced around him. Everything was quiet. There burned the lamp beside the hole where they had drawn the plug—there the wall, unbroken, its panels all sound; before him stood Azrak, perfectly composed, and arms afold; surely he must have been deceived by imagination—nothing had happened?

"Azzrak!" he cried, beating his temples with his knuckles, to make sure that he was awake, "am I dreaming? Have I had a nightmare? How came we here? Speak. Oh, how my head throbs and burns!"

"We have both been thoroughly awake, Master Hubert."

"Then you saw it—the—"

"Yes."

"And you recognized it, Azrak? It was—"

"It was the Spider of Wirthmoor;" and as he answered, the mulatto could not repress a shiver caused by memories which that name recalled.

Ulster moaned, and again his head sunk to his hands. But he roused abruptly.

"Accursed thing!" he snarled, "it shall not affright me. I am innocent. I owe it no reparation for the deed in the Labyrinth. To our work, Azrak!—come: the closet."

Shaking off the feeling that had taken possession of him, he gave his attention once more to the object of their visit there—the hidden closet of Eli Ellory, where he expected to find something of value, something to enrich himself and Azrak, according to his declaration upon first entering the room.

Quickly kneeling by the small hole in the planks, he pulled on the wire beneath.

"Watch, Azrak—the wall."

"It does not move."

"Now, Azrak," and he pulled again.

"It does not move," repeated the African.

A dozen times Hubert Ulster jerked the gleaming wire; but the panel remained immovable in its place. Then he sprang angrily to his feet.

"Sdeath! We are not to be balked. Since we know where to seek, we will find a way to force it open without the use of the spring. To the cellar, Azrak, and bring me a pickax. By the Eternal! if this devil-of-a-Spider be in there, we will rend him limb from limb"—and here his eyes blazed, and he clinched his fist as if crushing the hated being imaginatively in his grasp—"I am sick of it. I shall fear it no

longer. It is but a man—by all the demons of perdition! I will risk a tussle with it. Haste. To the cellar. Bring the ax, and we'll tear wide the wall!" He wheeled about with a ragged stamp of his foot, and began walking unrestedly to and fro.

Azrak hastened to obey. Had it not been that he knew the Spider was no longer in the secret closet, that he had left it by some other unknown exit—the recent peculiar wailing laugh in the hallway assuring him of the fact—the African would have counseled his employer to desist, for Azrak, too, entertained a dread of the hideous dwarf, which now appeared for the first time since they left county Sussex, England, ten years before.

The servitor had purposely withheld from Ulster any mention of what occurred during the latter's brief insensibility. As he moved swiftly along the hall, which was dimly lighted, his alert eyes caught sight of an object lying prone upon the carpet near the stairs—the figure of a female.

Hastening forward, he knelt beside her, but did not pause; with a quick movement he gathered her up and bore her to a room in the second story, where he laid her on a bed.

"Francoise!—and she has fainted. She must have seen the Spider; and how unfortunate." As he uttered the words, he sprinkled her face with water from the pitcher on the washstand.

His efforts soon revived her. Opening her eyes, she started with additional fear upon beholding the dark-skinned face bending over her couch, but immediately knew him.

"Miss Francoise," he whispered, mildly—his tone seemed always mild—and offering her a cup of water.

"And it is you, Azrak. Oh! what a horrible sight!"

"You saw the burglar, Miss Francoise?"

"Was it only a burglar?"

"Yes, a vicious thief, who, but for your uncle and myself, might have done more than rob us. Quiet yourself; it is past."

"He is gone? You are sure of that, Azrak? What were you and—uncle doing in the deserted room?" she looked keenly at him as she asked this, as though there rested a suspicion of some sort on her mind, which might have been a doubt of the truth of Azrak's assertion that the intruder was merely a common burglar.

"We pursued him there, Miss Francoise," he replied, smoothly, and refraining from an inquiry as to what took her to the third floor; "and I am sorry he frightened you so. I am glad he did not offer you harm. But, I must leave you. May I tell Martha to bring you some wine?"

"Yes."

Azrak withdrew. As he came out of the room, he heard Hubert Ulster calling impatiently from the floor above:

"Ho, Azrak! Be quick there. Do not keep me waiting. Be quick, I say!"

Descending the stairs, Azrak was muttering:

"Francoise suspects something. What was she doing so close to us while we were in the deserted room? It will not do to let that suspicion grow. She must not find out anything. Master Hubert is too precipitate. I will caution him," for he had not failed to note the keen look Francoise gave him, which was now annoying him.

On the first floor he met Martha, the cook, *en dishabille*.

"Didn't I hear a scream just now?" she asked, excitedly.

Azrak smiled till his white teeth showed.

"I was asleep on the lounge in the kitchen," added she, "and thought I heard a loud cry of distress up-stairs. Have you been up there?"

"Yes, and all is quiet. You dreamed it. But, I saw Miss Francoise, who bade me tell you to bring some wine—she is in her room."

The servant's curiosity and fears being allayed, she started to procure the wine from a cupboard in the dining hall, and Azrak continued in the direction of the cellar.

There were shovels, hoes, trowels, reels, and various other garden implements strewn in disorder over the earth-floor of the cellar, among which was a pickaxe. Having lighted a match, he selected the pick from the pile, and hastened to retrace his steps.

Regaining the third story, he found Ulster impatiently waiting for him at the top of the banister.

"You were a long time at it."

"Hush!" admonished Azrak, placing a finger to his lips. "Miss Francoise is awake;

Martha, the cook, is awake. It will not be wise to make much noise."

"Easy, then. Come." And as they passed into the barren room: "Close the door, Azrak. The walls are thick, and very little sound, if any, can escape here. Bring nigher the light. Stand ready to grapple with the devilish thing when it pops out on us. Let us strangle him! Now then!"

Hubert Ulster poised the pick above his head—then drove it with all his strength into that portion of the wall where he supposed the seam of the door to be. To his unbought astonishment, the panel swung outward without further effort.

But he paused in redoubled amazement, for beneath this panel was a second panel, and on the second—which barred his progress, and which seemed firmer set than the outer one—was posted a sheet of paper, bearing a singular warning that staggered him and made him stare, with the pick half-raised for another stroke.

The words on the panel were these:

"IF YOU ENTER, YOU DIE!"

And while the two were silent and motionless as statues, gazing with overwhelming surprise on the sign, another and a single eye was also fixed upon them and upon the mysterious words—an eye that flashed through the key-hole, eager, wondering and unseen.

CHAPTER VI.

A GIRL ON GUARD.

It was about 5.30 P. M. of the day on which Azrak visited the astrologer's chamber. Francoise Ellory was reclining languorously on a lounge in her boudoir, rapt in the perusal of a novel, though the room was darkened by approaching night and the heavy curtains of the windows till it was almost impossible to read.

A blonde of lovely type—her age not more than nineteen years; her face womanly, graceful, intellectual. The lips of red—ripe, sweet and tempting—were outlined in firmness; her glance was one denoting soft impulses of divine passion, governed by resolute character. Her glorious form, her rare charms, her looks, mien, tone of voice, all spoke the presence of a nature to love or despise, to cherish or distrust forever.

Near by sat Viola, the housemaid—a young girl of exquisite bloom and pretty features—crocheting deftly while her mistress was occupied with the book. Viola was much accustomed to spending her leisure with Francoise; she evinced delight in hastening through with the routine of duties, that she might seek and wait upon her mistress, whom she loved, and her companionship was agreeable to the niece of the banker, as she cared little for the outside world, and seldom appeared at ball, reception or charade.

"Viola," suddenly glancing up from the pages of the volume, "what is the matter with Coco Vargas?"

"With Coco Vargas? Why do you ask, miss?"

"I am reading here," Francoise continued, fingering the printed leaf, "of an uncle who denied his rich ward the company of her lover—for reasons to be explained, I presume, during the narrative. Now, it is my case precisely, Viola; you know that uncle Hubert has declared Senor Vargas an unfit acquaintance for me. That is why I ask. Have you ever heard of anything wrong in the character of Senor Vargas?"

"How could I hear anything?" inquiringly answered the girl, dropping her work to her lap, and seizing the opportunity for conversation. "I am hardly ever out of the house. Did not your uncle say he had a great deal of money deposited in the Merchants' Bank?"

"You have no idea what his business is, if he is engaged in any at all?"

"No, miss."

"Uncle says he believes him to be, possibly, a gambler."

"I will venture this much, at risk of displeasing you, miss," and Viola gave her head a twitch of emphasis, "I do not like the looks of this Senor Vargas, and I would not wish my mistress to fall in love with him."

"But what if I am already infatuated with him, Viola, against the order of my uncle?"

"I would not betray you— But is it true?"

"Partly. Senor Vargas will be here tomorrow night for a reply to his proposal."

Viola sighed. She did not appreciate the bold, handsome, dashing face of the Spaniard;

there was something in it that to her indicated lack of soul. She was silent, however, in her disappointment at hearing the announcement.

"I am also of age, you see, Viola, and I doubt very much if my uncle's jurisdiction amounts to much now. We will see," and the blonde beauty laughed merrily.

"I am glad that you will soon be free, Miss Francoise. I hope that you may find your heritage untouched."

"Untouched! Why, what do you mean?" exclaimed and asked Francoise, surprisedly.

Viola dropped her gaze and hesitated. Her position nigh Francoise was one of vast privileges for a servant; but she seemed unwilling or afraid to explain the meaning of her last speech.

"Tell me what you mean by that, Viola? Who could touch or rob me of what was left me by my father?"

"Miss Francoise," said the maid, after debating a few seconds, "I fear you are being deceived."

"Deceived—how?"

"I suspect that there is something left by your deceased father which you know not of, and which, if you do not act for yourself speedily, you will never obtain. Perhaps it is money."

"You talk in riddles, Viola. What is all this?" and strangely impressed by the manner of the girl, she laid aside the book, arising to a sitting posture and gazing in astonishment.

"Miss Francoise," pursued Viola, very grave, very distinct, "there is a closet somewhere in this house where your father kept, perhaps, his most important secrets. Did you know it?"

"A closet? No."

"So I thought. Your uncle has been searching for that closet for nearly nine years—ever since the death of your father."

"Strange that uncle Hubert never said anything to me about it?"

"No wonder," and Viola smiled; "I heard him tell Azrak, not half an hour ago, that they must be careful to conceal it from you."

"Ah! conceal from me the private possessions of my father? This seems like a plot. What is that you have there, Viola?"

The maid was slowly unfolding a slip of paper, saying:

"While on my way to this room I saw Mr. Ulster in the hall of the library. He was talking very low to Azrak. They did not see nor hear me; and I caught these words, spoken by your uncle: 'Use all possible speed, Azrak, and I will await you here. Remember, we cannot be too guarded in keeping this from Francoise. Should she suspicion what we are doing, it would be the loss of a fortune to us.' With that Azrak started away, and your uncle re-entered the library. As he went in, I saw something flutter from his pocket—a paper that had not been entirely thrust into it, and which he dropped then unknowingly. I felt that I had a right to know what it was they were withholding from my mistress; I felt that the paper was connected with it; for I have always thought something was wrong, from the time the will of your father appointed him your guardian without naming him as a relative, and his after declaration that he was your uncle—"

"Ah! Do you mean to say, Viola, that you doubt whether Hubert Ulster really is my uncle?"

"I do, though I may be wrong in my conclusions," answered and added Viola, warily casting a look toward the door, as if she feared some one might be listening. "You were so young, you know, Miss Francoise, when your dear father died—"

"Yes; only ten years old."

"There was nobody by but Mr. Ulster, Azrak, my mother, who was housekeeper here then, and the physician and yourself. You knew no relatives then, have met none since. Did you ever hear your mother's name?"

"Never!" exclaimed Francoise, in a hushed voice, and leaning quickly forward.

The question had struck into her heart some unutterable feeling that fairly startled her.

"I never heard mother's name spoken," she added, presently, "except by uncle Hubert, who affirmed that it was 'Ann Ulster,' and his own sister. Father told me—I remember it well—that she died before we came to St. Louis, while I was an infant."

Viola shook her head mysteriously.

"But the paper—what about the paper my uncle lost?" reminded Francoise, setting aside the second subject for the first, in her eager-

ness to hear what it was her uncle was projecting with such secrecy.

"I picked it up. You may read for yourself, miss; here it is." She handed Francoise the note Hubert Ulster had received from Jean Banquo in regard to the secret closet, which, it is shown, the banker had accidentally lost from his pocket.

Upon reading the crooked lines Francoise drew a short breath and crumpled the sheet in her hand.

"Viola!" she cried, "I must find out what uncle Hubert and Azrak are at. They have no right to keep from me the secrets of my father."

"No right at all, miss," agreed Viola, stoutly.

"I, too, will hunt for this closet. But stop; you say uncle has, even now, sent Azrak to the astrologer?"

"I did not say so positively, miss; but there can be no doubt of it."

"And if the charlatan does guide him correctly—"

"Then you must watch, Miss Francoise."

"Ay, watch!" and it was plain that Francoise was aroused, for she shut her white teeth hard together, and there was a kindling spirit in her deep blue eyes. "I will discover, as well as they, what my father has left unaccounted for. Where could such a closet be?"

"Not on the first floor, miss."

"No."

"Nor on the second."

"On the third, then."

"Yes."

"But why on the third?"

"You know, Miss Francoise, that my mother was housekeeper for Mr. Ellory, and was displaced when Mr. Ulster engaged Martha—a woman of his own picking. I often heard my mother say: 'Mr. Ellory is an odd man to have his office in the third story when there's a room in the second story fitted up for library and office together.'"

"Ah, yes," said Francoise, musingly. "I used to seek my father at the top of the house, when he came from the bank, and sit in his lap while he looked over his private papers. I recollect the room. I have not been there since the day he was buried. And you think the closet is there, Viola?"

"Would there be a more likely place—the private office of your father?" argued the maid, brightly. "Once I peeped into it, through the keyhole, and I saw that the walls were paneled—a fact quite suggestive, I think."

"I will go to the paneled room," resolved Francoise, abruptly.

But Viola protested:

"In that case you would learn nothing, for they would find you. Be guided by me, miss."

"By you? What do you propose?"

It was not the first time Francoise Ellory had listened to the advice of her maid. She depended in many ways on Viola's ready wit, and relied on her abilities.

"The closet may not be in the paneled room, Miss Francoise, and you would lose your opportunity. If Azrak has really gone to the astrologer, he will be back shortly. He must approach the house by the south and east. If I am in the garden I can see him coming—"

"Impossible!" interposed Francoise, catching the girl's idea. "The night will be a dark one, Viola, for it is cloudy—yes, raining, even now. You would not be out in the rain? See!" having crossed to the window, and then pointing outward, as she gazed through the drizzling dim of the fast-settling night.

"For you, Miss Francoise, I would do any thing. Do not mind that. I will watch in the garden, and when I see him approaching I will call out three times. At the third call, you will know that Azrak has entered the house. Be on your guard. Follow them, and you can not fail to discover them at their tricks."

"It shall be as you say!" Francoise exclaimed, almost before the maid had finished speaking. "You are a good girl to me, Viola; rely upon it, I will some day reward you as you deserve."

"I only want your love, miss," said the devoted Viola, tremulously; and then: "but I'll hasten at once to put on a thick suit."

The maid hurried from the apartment, and Francoise, when alone, read again the note bearing the signature of the astrologer, which had so opportunely come into her possession.

"It is plain," she muttered, with a frown on her fair face, "that uncle and Azrak are working at something which it is my right to know.

Ha! what was that Viola said? She doubts whether Hubert Ulster is my uncle, the same feeling that has gnawed in my heart for years past. Can it be possible? Viola is a shrewd girl. I must think of this, for I, too, have imagined that he has acted unlike what might be expected from the brother of my mother."

Grave indeed were her meditations following her lowly-uttered thoughts. The recent conversation with her maid plunged her mind into a vale of seriousness, a field of wondering, excited, conflicting suspicions and queries, that coursed upon her brain to electrify and perplex.

When night had fully set in, there was a motionless, listening figure at the hall window overlooking the garden. Francoise, dressed in black, and scarce discernible amid the surrounding gloom, was at her vigil.

It was not long ere there came a cry from the far side of the garden: presently a second, and soon a third.

And these were the three cries that had penetrated to the library, when Hubert Ulster had fallen asleep in his chair, the last of which startled him from his nervous slumber and unpleasant dreams—the signals from Viola, the maid, to her mistress, Francoise, apprising the latter of the approach of Azrak.

Ulster and the African were unaware, as they ascended to the paneled room, that they were followed. Francoise was close behind them; so close that, when Azrak leaned to draw the lamp forward from the doorsill—that Ulster might have more light to aid him in extracting the plug—he could have seen her, had he been suspicious and raised his eyes.

Francoise was gazing in through the door-crack by the hinges. She saw the panel swing open, saw the horrible apparition disclosed in the wall, saw the overwhelming effect produced upon her uncle, and alarmed by the strangeness, the fearful aspect of the tableau, she staggered back, clapping her hands to her eyes.

As she stood, trembling, and the impression of what she had seen dizzying her brain, she heard a patter of footsteps coming toward her. A quick glance discovered the dwarfed, impish, Satanic-featured thing that had appeared in the wall, the lamp-rays through the doorway slanting over its ghoul-like visage, and sickening her with a frenzy of terror.

Uttering a loud scream, she fled in the direction of the stairs.

The pattering steps, the hideous shape pursued her. There was a weird, wailing laugh behind. In another second she felt a set of icy-cold fingers on her wrist—then a blank, for she swooned helplessly.

When Martha, the cook, brought the wine to the room of her young mistress, as directed by Azrak, Viola was there, having just entered, after laying off her rain wet clothes.

"Set the salver on the table, Martha," said Francoise. "And you may retire, now."

"What did you see, miss?" asked Viola, when they were alone. "You have been frightened."

For, upon coming to the apartment, the girl had found Francoise with her face buried in her handkerchief, and terribly agitated.

Francoise related, not without a tremor, all that she had witnessed. Viola was awed.

"Who could that horrible fellow have been?" she wondered.

"Azrak, who brought me here while I was in a swoon, said it was a burglar. But he lied to me, Viola; I know it was a falsehood. The thing was not human. And my uncle cowered and fainted before it; as though it was a devil from the dark regions to charge him with a heinous crime. He called it 'the Spider!' But it was far worse. Oh, Viola, Viola! there is some black mystery in my uncle's life. What can it be? What is this dreadful shape?"

"Pshaw, Miss! I don't believe in ghosts. But let us think of the main point; if your uncle has found the closet, he may get what he wants, and you'll never find out, after all, what it is. You ought to go back at once—"

"No, no, no!" interrupted Francoise, shuddering. "I would not return there for anything in the world."

"Then I'll go for you, miss," declared Viola, resolutely.

"No, Viola—stay—"

But the maid was gone.

As she left the room of her mistress, she saw Azrak ascending the stairs, carrying the heavy pick-ax. On tip-toe she followed him, deter-

mined to learn everything possible for the benefit of Francoise, and it was her eye that spied upon Hubert Ulster and Azrak, when the two men paused in indecision and stared at the words of warning which repelled them from the wall—the words:

"IF YOU ENTER YOU DIE!"

Viola heard the mulatto say:

"Master Hubert, beware. Do not push this further."

Then Ulster:

"How came that there? I defy it—"

"No—stop; there is danger if we go on, Master Hubert. You will do well to heed it."

Ulster dashed the pick to the floor in a rage. "Be it so!" he snarled, with an oath. "Let it rest. Before we break the place open, we will see the astrologer."

He paused short in surprise.

Azrak had ventured a low exclamation and sprung toward the door.

The sudden crash of the pick-ax, and the fierce oath of the angry man, had startled Viola. She drew back with nervous quickness, and, in so doing, her forehead struck the knob of the latch, causing it to rattle.

Azrak knew the significance of the sound instantly—somebody was spying upon them. With a leap that was agile, and unusual to his calm dignity, he wrenched open the door, and in the next breath he had grappled Viola by the throat with one hand, smothering, with the other, the gurgling cry that rose to the lips of the terrified maid.

"Oho!" snapped Ulster, hastening to his man, "so we have a spy in the house! Her curiosity has led her too far. Curse her! we'll cure her of that."

"Master Hubert, she has seen all!" hissed Azrak, his eyes scintillating on the helpless form in his vise-like grasp.

"Don't kill her, Azrak—hold, there! We must commit no murder. Ha! she has fainted. So much the better."

Viola lay limp in the arms of the African, her face as white as the hue of death.

"What to do with her, Master Hubert?"

"Follow me—haste. She has seen all, eh? She will see no more. Come."

Ulster snatched up the lamp and made for the rear staircase—the servants' end of the building. Viola, overcome by terror, had swooned outright, and the African bore her as if she was no more than a child. Pausing a moment to close and lock the door of the paneled room, he followed the lead of his employer.

Hubert Ulster went straight to the cellar. Adjoining the cellar in which we saw Azrak procure the pick-ax was another cellar that had been used by Eli Ellory, the former owner of the house, for the storage of wines. Ulster never touched spirituous liquors, and since the death of the father of Francoise the vault had remained unfrequented and neglected.

Passing through the iron door connecting the cellars, Ulster flashed the light ahead. As he looked around among the shadows of the place, a shiver crept over him; he felt as though the devilish and dreaded shape of the Spider lurked in the cobwebbed recesses, to spring out and pounce upon him and lacerate him with its terrible claws.

"Leave her here, Azrak—drop her," he said, uneasily. "Hurry. Let us be out of this. My blood begins to curdle."

In the same instant that they secured the iron door, leaving their victim alone with the terrors of the ghostly murk, she revived under the influence of the icy-cold air.

"Hark!" whispered the African, halting with one hand raised.

They heard a deadened wail from within, a worded scream of despair:

"Help! Help! Merciful Heaven! where am I?"

Presently another cry and another. Drawing nigh the door, they heard a noise of struggle.

"What can that mean?" muttered Ulster, more to himself.

"Rats!" answered the mulatto, "rats that are mad and hungry. They will swarm upon her and devour her."

A sickening sensation quivered the nerves and muscles of the banker; but he turned abruptly away.

"Come!" he ordered, huskily. "She knows too much—she knows too much."

And Azrak obeyed grimly, keeping near on the heels of his employer.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GAME AT WHICH TWO CAN PLAY.

COCO VARGAS was not to be confined to the subterranean rooms of Jean Banquo, even by the fear of the law consequent upon the act which, he was confident, had avenged him for past injuries.

Besides chafing like a caged animal, he had important business to attend to, which, when developed in due course, will give the reader an insight to the true character of the man.

Rather late in the afternoon of the day subsequent to the affair at the gambling saloon, he was on the levee. But it was not Coco Vargas as we have so far seen him.

Among the ship-bands, draymen, carts, wagons, landing and freighting goods, walked a powerful, coarsely-dressed, red-whiskered individual, who wore his dirt-gray pants tucked into his boots, and who carried a huge cart-whip slung and tied over one shoulder across breast and back. A monstrous-brimmed soft hat was pulled down on his brows in savage style, and what could be seen of his face was sullen and repellent. And this was Vargas.

He strolled leisurely along to a dingy restaurant not far from the levee, on Plum street. But he did not enter the place immediately, for, as he drew near, a man who was dressed similarly to himself issued from the double-jointed doorway and accosted him.

"I've been waiting for you," he said.

"Well, and I am here. So. What of our plans, captain?"

"All right. I showed the diagram to Davie, and explained the whole thing—he can't read, you know. He says we can accomplish it. He says you're a 'brick'—"

"A 'brick'! *Caramba!*"

"A clever one, he means. So I rented the store-house next to the bank, this morning. We can go to work right off."

"And your vessel, Captain Baxter?"

"She'll be in this day week," replied Baxter. "My son Dick runs her now, you know. We can sling up our sign, begin the digging, and be ready for her. A clean skoot for New Orleans, and then for Europe, with our pockets full."

"It is good. Give me the paper. Commence at once. Here is a check. Stock the store, and open it. I will see you to-morrow. What is the number?"

"903. I put it down on the paper here."

The ex-captain gave Vargas a paper, which the latter stowed away in his pocket. In return, the Spaniard gave Baxter a check on the Merchant's bank—where, as we have been told, Coco Vargas had deposited a sum of money—which he had filled out before leaving the den of Banquo, in view of this meeting at the liquor-shop on Plum street.

They lingered awhile at the dingy restaurant, conversing confidentially together, and more than once the name of the Merchants' bank fell from the lips that were speaking guardedly. About nightfall, Vargas separated from him.

Retracing his way along the levee, the Spaniard repaired to a costumer's store—a ragged-looking establishment, where he had exchanged his own suit, temporarily, for the disguise he then wore. Resuming his accustomed apparel—retaining, however, the whiskers and the slouch hat—he started forth again. As he moved rapidly away, he glanced at his watch, and muttered:

"Now, then, to see my beloved Francoise!—ah! beautiful Francoise. To-night, I am to receive an answer—to know whether she will be the sweet wife of her adorer, Coco Vargas. Lucky Vargas! Already she is half mine: her sighs, her fond glances, her soft syllables, the touch of her dainty hand on my shoulder, her smiles whenever I go to her, her eyes of beaming joy, the flutter of her breath when I asked her to wed me—oh, glorious Francoise! I can persuade her to accompany me to Europe, to luxury, to pleasure—how sublime! *Caramba!* will she do it? Baxter's vessel will be ready in one week to bear us away. In one week the Merchants' bank will be despoiled of thousands. Ho! I must withdraw my own funds before that; some ten thousand—a paltry capital for Coco Vargas. I need money. This hunt for eleven years after Favia Claremont—accursed Sphinx!—has run my pocket dry. Banquo fares better. First, the money from the bank; second, beautiful Francoise. With the money and Francoise, I shall be infinitely happy," and musing in this strain,

he arrived before the house of Hubert Ulster, at the end of his very long walk.

Ascending the steps he rung the bell. There was no response. A second and third time he jerked the knob; but the summons was unanswered.

"Ha!—strange," he exclaimed, looking up at the darkened windows. "But there is a dim light in the parlor— Oh, the door is open! *Caramba!* if everybody has gone out, what a fine chance for thieves, with the door open!"

Pressing against the door, which was not locked, he passed in; and immediately upon doing so, he discarded his side-whiskers.

Hanging his hat on the rack, he entered the parlor and jerked the bell-rope there. But the house was ominously still.

"*Caramba!*" he blurted, out of patience, and striding back to the door. "Ho, there! Martha! Viola! servants! there is a visitor. Where are you?—Ha! what's this?" and here, as he wheeled about, he espied a small, delicately-folded epistle lying on the table.

"A note. And for me"—scanning the address; "it is from Francoise. What does she say?"

Tearing open the perfumed sheet, he read:

"SEÑOR VARGAS: I am unavoidably absent this evening, and sorry to disappoint you. Call to-morrow P. M., same hour, if convenient."

"FRANCOISE."

"Ho!" thought Vargas, aloud, "she is short and affectionate. 'Call again,' and 'Francoise.' I will call again. *Caramba!* I will call a dozen times at her command."

And in another minute he was outside.

Hardly had Coco Vargas reached the pavement, when he perceived a close carriage driving up. Thinking it might be Francoise, he paused. The pause was fatal.

A spectral figure glided from the shadow of the high door-steps; there was a whirring sound, and the noose of a lasso settled over the Spaniard's shoulders, pinioning his arms to his sides.

"H-o! I am attacked. Kidnappers! Back, there!" he roared, struggling to free himself.

But the slip of the noose was tight and strong, and he was being jerked and dragged backward helplessly.

"Villains! Assassins! Dios! Let go!" he gasped.

A second figure appeared, and four arms, like hands of steel, coiled around him, throwing him to the pavement with a trip and a thump.

The door of the carriage was thrown open at that instant, and a female voice cried:

"Make sure there, Nelson—Grego; don't let him escape you!"

"Furies of thunder! it is the Sphinx!" bel-lowed Vargas, recognizing the voice; and just then a merciless stroke from a billy rendered him insensible.

Quick as a flash he was lifted and borne to the waiting carriage. His captors also got in, and the vehicle dashed furiously southward in the dim starlight.

"Ha! h-a!" rung the voice of Favia Claremont, "it is my turn again, Coco Vargas! The Sphinx is not yet dead!"

It will be remembered that, at about the same hour P. M. on this day—or very little earlier—Girasa had hastened to her master, Jean Banquo, with the announcement that there were enemies in the art gallery.

"There is but one, Girasa, whom I call my enemy," was the return of the astrologer, to her flurried speech, "and that one I hate with all my heart—a hate so dire that I will one day torture him, make him die a myriad deaths; for he murdered my father, and broke the heart of my sister."

The small eyes snapped, and he hissed the words with a deadly venom in the tone, showing how deep-set in his soul was the fire of hatred he bore his sworn enemy.

"It is he of whom I speak—that very one," panted Girasa.

"Hubert Ulster! Is Hubert Ulster here?"

"At this moment in the gallery."

The brush and pallet fell from Banquo's hand. He struck himself hard on the breast, as if to drive out a sudden twinging pang.

"And my picture is not yet done!" he cried, in excitement, taking two or three hurried turns around the chamber—while he shook his arms at his sides, and gritted his teeth harshly in a passion; then: "But he shall not escape.

No, no. The chance is too good. Back to the gallery, Girasa, and—"

"Ah, Jean Banquo," demurred the negress, interrupting, "do I not tell you I fear that he has recognized me? What if he should unmask me before all those inquisitive people? Would it not weaken your plot for revenge? As I was on my way here, he started toward me—caught me by the sleeve—I could see, by his surprised and searching glance, that he suspected me—"

"Calm your fears!" broke in the astrologer, almost fiercely. "You have wit enough to defy his penetration. Return up-stairs, and tap the bell. As the visitors pass out, detain Hubert Ulster. Tell him that Jean Banquo would speak to him alone—alone, Girasa, for it would be dangerous to have his man, Azrak, here at the same time. Go quick, and have no fears."

Girasa obeyed, though it was evident that she dreaded coming in close contact with Hubert Ulster. Going first to the front door, to arrange for the transportation of the picture we have seen her sell—reaching the entrance by the route pursued by Coco Vargas the night before—she then returned to the thronged gallery, and tapped upon the gong-bell over the doorway.

It was the artist's mode of dismissing his visitors regularly at nightfall. Being at that moment the usual hour for the summons to leave—that is, exactly one hour before his reception of those who sought for consultation—they began to go out at once upon hearing the bell.

Girasa stationed herself at the entrance below, to intercept the banker. But, as they went by her, one by one, or in couples, or in trios, she looked in vain for him. Soon all were gone.

"He must have withdrawn while I was in the vaulted chamber," she thought. "At any rate, he is not here. Who is this, I wonder?"

A cab had whirled up to the curb, and in the dim of the nearly drawn night, Girasa saw a veiled figure—a female—step quickly out.

"Is not this the house of Jean Banquo?" inquired the veiled personage, as the negress lingered at the half-open door.

"Yes."

"I wish to see him without delay."

"That is impossible, madam, for you are an hour too early; and my master is rigorous."

"I tell you I must see him!" exclaimed the visitor, persistently. "I am not here to have an idle fortune told—it is business of a pressing nature with Jean Banquo personally, who alone can aid me in a trying dilemma. Girl, do not refuse me. Take me to your master. Here is money to bribe you," dropping a heavy purse.

The earnestness and determined tone of the comer seemed to influence the negress.

"Put up your purse," she said. "If it is not merely to have your fortune told, but business of a personal nature with my master, Jean Banquo, and of so much importance, I will admit you. You will run the risk of fluding him in an exceeding bad humor—"

"No matter. Let me see him, please."

"Come in, hen."

Conducting the female to the gallery, Girasa paused to light the bracketed lamps about the room, and also entered a small closet where were several jars and a battery used for a purpose to be shown anon. Next she blindfolded her companion, according to rule, and led her, by the secrecy of the swinging picture in the alcove, to the door at the end of the underground corridor. Here she gave the customary signal.

"Who is there?" called the astrologer, who believed it to be Girasa bringing Hubert Ulster to his presence.

"It is I," answered the negress. "I bring not a man, but a woman, who says she must see you on business of the utmost importance."

There was a delay in opening the door, when Banquo at length slid the bolt and bade them enter.

"Turning to Girasa, he asked, quickly:

"Where is he?"

"I cannot say. He must have left while I was with you. He was not among those who went out when I tapped the bell."

"Never mind. Go to the gallery, and do not admit any one. When I want you I'll ring."

Banquo removed the bandage from his visitor's eyes—it having been tied on over the veil,

which she refused to raise—and stepped backward to his low divan.

The veiled figure stood motionless in the center of the chamber, and her eyes wandered slowly over her strange surroundings, wondering at what she saw. The rocky roof, smooth and glittering with stars; the stony sides polished to glassiness, covered with nameless, cornicled shapes; the globes, measures, diagrams and Sabian signs; various instruments of alchemy, astrolatry, and kaleidoscopes; the sable, screened picture on the monstrous easel; the ottomans, the mats, the rich divan, and, last of all, the white bearded gnome who turned his spiral-striped wand round and round till it resembled a mass of wriggling serpents climbing upward through his hand and above his head: these awed, half startled her, for she knew not where she was, and doubted whom she beheld.

"Unvail," said the astrologer, with his small eyes bent keenly upon her. "Unvail, madam, for I know you."

"Who am I?" she demanded.

"Francoise Ellory, niece of Hubert Ulster, the banker."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ASTOUNDING REVELATION.

JEAN BANQUO smiled grimly as he pronounced the identity of his visitor, and the serpentine stick revolved more rapidly in his yellow hand.

She threw aside her veil with a gesture of surprise.

"Since you so easily discovered who I am, perhaps you can tell me what brought me here, Jean Banquo?"

"That is not difficult," answered the gnome, his little eyes twinkling. "Be seated nigh me, and we will talk about it."

He motioned her to a high hassock beside his divan, and continued, when she was seated:

"I have read of your coming, in the stars, Francoise Ellory. Your visit to me is one of inquiry—you are worried, too."

"Cease your mummeries, Jean Banquo; I do not believe in your professions. But—yes, I am here to make certain inquiries."

"So," pursued the astrologer, nodding. "And you wish to know something of a closet hidden in the house where you now live, and which, you suppose, contains important secrets connected with your deceased father—"

"Ah! by what sorcery—"

"Oh, I know—I am fully aware of the cause of your coming."

"Pah! it is a mere inference," exclaimed the beautiful blonde, impatiently; "you sent this letter to my uncle," and here she produced the note from the astrologer to the banker. "It is in reference to a secret closet in the house that is my home. Azrak, my uncle's man, came to you last night and secured the instructions it promises. They opened the closet, and were confronted by a fearful shape that frightened my uncle out of his senses—"

"How happened you to be so well posted?" interrupted Banquo.

"Through my maid, who is devoted to me," replied Francoise, promptly and stern.

"And you followed your uncle to the paneled room?"

"They had no right to conceal from me the secrets of my father. My maid, Viola, also followed them after I withdrew—"

"After you fainted and was carried to your room," corrected the gnome, impressively.

Francoise looked at him amazed.

"How did you find that out?" she demanded in a quick breath.

"Proceed, Francoise Ellory. Presently we will get at your exact business here. Remember, Jean Banquo, the astrologer, knows more than some people dream of, or would wish him to know. For every soul on earth there is a star in the skies; every star has a page upon its face that only men like me may read. Stars and souls are the two unsolved problems of the universe—the first a record of some human fate, the second a kaleidoscope of thought, governed by the unseen power that holds each constellation above its subject among the dust, the bloom, or the light, or the dark of Nature. Go on, Francoise Ellory."

"My maid," said Francoise, who was mute during the brief, singular speech of the gnome, "has not been seen since she left me to complete what I had not the strength to continue.

She has disappeared. I fear some injury has befallen her."

"Probably," hinted the astrologer, meaningly. "If she dogged the doings of Hubert Ulster, and was caught, he is the man to silence her tongue forever, and by a deed as foul as human brain can conceive."

"Explain yourself, Jean Banquo. What makes you denounce my uncle as a bad man?" She asked this in a slow but eager way, and gazed sharply into the gnome's little, gleaming eyes.

"Wait. Your business; then I will speak."

"This afternoon," Francoise resumed, "when my uncle and Azrak went out, I ascended to the paneled room. The door was locked; but I looked through the keyhole, and saw, on the opposite wall, one of the panels hanging outward—at the spot where the dreadful object appeared in the closet. But the wall was still solid with another panel, and on it was a sheet of paper bearing the words: 'If you enter, you die!' By the fact of this warning being there, and as the door was locked, I judge that my uncle has not yet entered the closet for the accomplishment of his purpose, whatever that purpose may be. Now, first: what has become of my maid, Viola? if you are sorcerer enough to imagine. Second: what is there in the closet, which my uncle is desirous of keeping from me, and which you, very strangely, seem to be the only person cognizant of?—and by what means can I gain access to it? Finally, what, or who, was that ugly fiend in the wall, that so terrified my uncle?—for he shrieked aloud, and became insensible—what is there between it and him that it should so affect him? I heard him cry: 'The Spider! The Spider!' Answer me those questions, Jean Banquo!"

The gnome smiled again. There was a vindictive glitter in his eyes now, and the wreathing of his lips was like that of a snake's fangs, betraying the anger and conflict of pestering thoughts.

"Francoise Ellory," he said, and there was a harsh strain in his tone, "two of your questions I will answer—the third, or first one, I cannot." The serpent stick went round still faster in his hand; his eyes seemed changing hues, melting, firing, expanding like orbs of red-hot iron alternating their glow in the heat and cold of rising, half-pent passion. He was striving hard to control himself. "Hubert Ulster—your uncle, as the world calls him—is a base wretch to his heart's core—Wait! Keep your seat!"—for Francoise, alarmed by his sudden vehemence, his hissing syllables, his blazing eyes, had started back—"you need not fear me; Jean Banquo bears you no ill-will. Hubert Ulster found out by some means unknown to me, that Eli Ellory had a secret closet in his house, where he stowed several thousand dollars in bright, ringing coin. It is that he seeks, and it is that he would rob you of. I have spied in his house when he slept; I have, more than once, held a dagger at his throat when he dreamed dark dreams in the hour of midnight—"

"Terrible man! For what?" gasped Francoise.

"For my revenge—but it was not to come in that way. I chanced upon the paneled room while skulking in the upper story, and I chanced again on a small plug in the floor, near the door, underneath which I found a wire. By pulling on this wire I next discovered the closet. But, I have destroyed that spring. There is now only one way to enter the closet, and that by swinging out the mantlepiece in the next room, which will give access at the side of the closet. There is a vase sitting on the mantlepiece that has been allowed to remain there ever since Eli Ellory died. Turn this vase round twice, and the wall will open. The chimney hole above the mantlepiece does not open into a flue, but is a ventilator to the hidden closet."

"A-h!" Francoise exclaimed, as if her memory just then recalled an item of the past, "how well I remember; the room of which you speak was never occupied while my father was alive; and I often wondered, when I was a child, why he insisted that the old vase should remain and be untouched on the mantlepiece. This then was its mystery."

"I overheard your uncle and his tool, Azrak, speaking of the closet," Banquo continued, in his rapid accents. "I learned that they had been searching for it for nearly nine years. It has been in my power to gain possession of the money—for I have seen it in its leathern, tight-

tied bags—but Jean Banquo is not a thief. When I sent that note to Hubert Ulster yesterday—and here the flame of his eyes, the heaving of his breast, the hot breath of his words grew deeper and drier—"I wanted him to come. I had laid a trap for his death! stay!—I say you need not fear me." Francoise had arisen and stepped backward, awed, and now dragging the harsh-voiced, fiery-eyed, terrible-spoken dwarf.

"You ask who or what the hideous shape was that you, that he and this man saw in the wall? First, let me tell you that Hubert Ulster is not your uncle—"

"Jean Banquo!"

"There is not one drop of blood in his family that ever ran in yours! He is an impostor. To serve his own purposes, he has proclaimed the relationship. Nearly ten years ago he came to St. Louis, and after a brief business acquaintance became one of the directors of the Merchants' Bank. When Eli Ellory died, Ulster succeeded to his position as president of the bank. Your father and he were intimate—that was all. Eli Ellory did not know that he was confiding his little daughter—then not more than ten years old—to the guardianship of a black-hearted villain, a hypocrite, an assassin! Hubert Ulster is no less! Remember this; I reveal it for your welfare. I know Hubert Ulster. I know him too well—and, oh! how I hate—I hate him!"

The astrologer was quivering from head to foot. His long beard shook like a spray of thistle-down in a fierce blast, and his hands trembled till the end of the long wand rattled on the floor. Under the wash that hitherto softened his complexion, he was red and fairly purple, and his teeth ground out every word like stony corn-grains crushed between the jaws of a horse. A hatred deadly, ungovernable and frightful, seethed in his dwarfish form, burning to the center of his soul, and, for the moment, rendering him speechless.

Francoise was riveted. His outburst chained her in shudders. She could but return the unvarying gaze of those flaming, unearthly eyes, horribly enchanted by them, and held in a clammy spell.

"You want to know what the shape was?" he gibbered, his voice, like his frame, shaking and passion-strung. "You heard your uncle call it 'The Spider!' It is a thing he has cause to shrink from—yet it is human. That 'Spider' is a man—a man with a heart of feeling, that loved, that was once tender and affectionate, a heart turned to a boiling furnace of rage and vengeance by Hubert Ulster!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SHOT FROM THE DOORWAY.

THE banker and the African had ascended to the cupola-observatory on the roof above the art gallery.

They had come to seek Jean Banquo in pursuance with the resolve of Ulster, who meant to purchase his advice before forcing open the wall in the paneled room, in defiance of the warning they saw there.

They had been but a few minutes in the observatory—and Hubert Ulster was poking about among the singular instruments strewn there—when Azrak said:

"A word, Master Hubert; listen to me."

"Eh? What is it? See this, Azrak—and this"—tapping here and there with his cane. "The furniture of this place suggests that Jean Banquo may be a practical astronomer, as well as fortune-teller."

But Azrak was paying no attention to the various objects surrounding them. He was very sober, and his dark eyes were of a thoughtful glance.

"I have seen what you did not," he pursued. "I have made a discovery, Master Hubert."

"Oh, you've made a discovery! Well, what is it?" continuing his examination of the disordered instruments.

"I know how to reach the den of the astrologer without the aid of a guide."

The effect of the speech was electrical.

"Ha! Azrak!"—Ulster spoke quickly, and grasped him by the arm. "What's that you say? Tell me what you have seen?"

"When the disguised woman, Girasa, went into the alcove, she was too hasty in her desire to escape us. She did not draw the curtains tight enough. As we ascended these stairs, I looked back, and saw—"

"You saw—what did you see, Azrak?"

"Through a narrow space in the curtains, I

saw her swing out the great picture against the wall, and disappear beyond it."

"Hol! you did? What then? Ah! that is the way to the den of Jean Banquo. I see."

Azrak nodded wisely.

Ulster nervously stroked his chin for some seconds, gazing down at the ferule of his cane on the floor. When he looked up, there was a snap in his eyes and a keenness to his voice.

"Azrak," he said, in a rapid tone, "why could we not find out something of this charlatan? Since you know the way to reach him—by Jupiter! we may get at some of his secrets, view him in his solitary trickeries; for he is a man of secrets beyond question."

Azrak inclined his head a second.

"We may learn, too, who this woman is, disguised as a negress and in the service of the astrologer. I'll swear that I have met her before, when she wore a white face."

"We will be wary, Master Hubert, and pry into the stronghold and doings of Jean Banquo for the benefit of a community deluded by his impositions."

"Yes; that is it, Azrak. If we are caught, we are two strong men, and can fight our way out despite any sorceries he may practice upon us. Good. It is settled. We will unmask this abominable wizard!—How dark it grows!"

"The sun has gone down, Master Hubert. See! is not that a grand prospect?"—waving his hand eastward toward the rolling Mississippi, to the south over the chimneyed city, to the west, where lay the open country, its horizon redolent as gilded lava with the gorgeous hues of sunset.

"Very fine. But how can we manage in the dark?"

"We shall have another light here, pretty soon—more than we want."

"What do you mean?"

"The beacon of the astrologer."

"His beacon?" repeated Ulster, inquiringly.

"Every night, at the time of his reception of visitors, this cupola is illuminated, and can be seen at a great distance in all directions."

"A lighthouse!" Ulster exclaimed. "What was that, Azrak?"

"The astrologer's bell," replied the African, listening. "Girasa is dismissing the people in the gallery. Look over here and you may see them depart"—stepping to the front rail of the platform, which was directly at the eaves, where, by glancing downward, a full view of the street was plain.

Ulster and the mulatto watched the throng passing out. In the increasing dusk of evening they could not be seen at that height by those on the pavement, and possibly not by parties in the opposite building.

It was Ulster's intention to remain there till all had gone, and Girasa was off her guard, when they could proceed with their plot to ferret into the privacy of the astrologer—a dangerous plot, for they had yet to learn the ways and traps and means of defense at the command of Jean Banquo.

"Banquo has an early visitor to night," said Azrak, who observed the cab that came furiously along the street and drove up to the door.

"Yes. Quiet, now," admonished the banker, withdrawing from the edge and listening.

They stood like carved specters in the gloom—waiting.

Suddenly Hubert Ulster staggered back and clapped his hands to his eyes. There was a peculiar, hissing, crackling noise in the air around them; tiny sparks seemed dancing here and there, like shooting stars; in another second, the burners of artificial gas-lamps, arranged in a semi-circular row breast-high, flashed forth a brilliant, blazing glare that nearly blinded the banker and the African, and startled them by its intensity.

The illumination was caused by the action of Girasa when she entered the closet containing the coated jars in the saloon below. The means by which she lighted the reflector-burners in the cupola, instantaneously and from such a distance, was a mode afterward brought into extensive application by Prof. Pepper, of the London Polytechnic Institute.

"Hush!" whispered Azrak, grasping his employer by the arm. "Step back—quick, or we will be discovered. Look." He pointed to the house opposite, where their two shadows, colossally defined, showed upon the wall.

"Let us descend, Master Hubert. All is silent below."

And at the moment Girasa led Francoise

Ellory from the gallery through the door behind the picture in the alcove, Azrak was looking from the interstice of the curtains that draped the narrow stairway leading to the cupola.

"Now is our time," said the African.

"Go ahead," and he followed Azrak, who was gliding swiftly toward the alcove.

"Haste, before she starts to return," the African urged, as they began descending the stairs in the room beyond the picture.

Reaching the second room, they paused, hesitating.

"I thought I heard a step," muttered Azrak, bending his head.

"Curse it!" snarled the banker, nervously, while he drew a pistol from his pocket and knitted his shaggy brows in a dark scowl. "You must be mistaken. I heard nothing. But, if she detects us, I'll awe her to silence with this"—and he cocked the weapon with savage determination. "Which way now, Azrak?"

"Yonder," pointing to the second hole in the floor.

Passing down the next flight they found themselves in the cellar. There was no lamp here—a Stygian darkness prevailed, only relieved by a faint glimmer from the trap above, and from the entrance to the corridor below.

"What devilish twisted place have we ventured into?" Ulster mumbled, pettishly. "We shall break our shins, or our necks, perhaps, directly!"

"Hist!" warned the mulatto, dragging him backward into the impenetrable surrounding. "She is coming. Take care."

Girasa was ascending the stone staircase. They could scarce distinguish her against so faint a background; but they heard and listened to her footfalls until the sound died out.

When assured that she was gone, they proceeded—first removing their boots, and leaving them where they could be found.

Then down the stone staircase, between the walls of masonry—tiptoeing, crouching, now pausing, now advancing a few paces—like burglars they went; and while the banker held his pistol ready for a shot, Azrak gripped the stout cane in a hand of iron.

Unintentionally, Banquo had not entirely closed the door after the departure of Girasa, nor did he perceive the dark fingers on the surface of the door, forcing it slowly ajar, nor was he aware of the two faces—one white and the other black—that peered in at him as he talked with Francoise Ellory. For at the instant Ulster and Azrak gained a view of the interior and its occupants, the gnome was absorbed by his terrible frenzy, his outburst of denunciative rage, and did not dream that the very object of his fearful rage was within earshot and sight of him.

And they were just in time to hear Francoise ask, breathless and brokenly:

"What has my uncle ever done to you, Jean Banquo?"

"He is not your uncle, I tell you! You may thank Heaven that the accursed blood of his veins never flowed with yours—"

"What has he done to you?" she repeated, interrupting, though she spoke mechanically.

"Enough to drive me mad!" cried the astrologer, writhing more and more. "He killed my father, Roderick Wirth, of Wirthmoor, England; he broke the heart of my sister. I have sworn to avenge myself upon him, and the time will come soon. I have known two crosses in my life, that have changed me to the hungry, stinging serpent I am; the first, desertion by the woman I loved—a devilish Sphinx, who once stabbed your lover, Coco Vargas, in Cairo!—the second the murder of my father by the man who paid vain suit to my sister—"

"What do you know of Coco Vargas?" broke in Francoise, infused with excitement by the rapid, sharp-edged speeches of the gnome.

"Enough to warn you that he is not the man for Francoise Ellory to marry—a gambler, and perhaps worse; while you are good and pure. But never tell him I said this. Give back your love to Montrose, the model-maker, and you will do well. But, it is not of Coco Vargas we are speaking—it is of myself. You want to know what the ugly deformity was that you, that Hubert Ulster and Azrak, saw in the wall? I'll tell you. It was Tyron Wirth, son of Roderick, called the 'Spider of Wirthmoor.' Behold!—I am the Spider!"

As Jean Banquo almost shouted the last, he

tore off his copious turban and great beard, and ran to a basin on a skeleton stand behind his divan. In a trice, he had washed the false colors from his face, and when he turned again upon Francoise—with his mass of midnight hair disheveled, his eyes afire and aglow in passion, his dwarfed body crooked, and yellow hands working convulsively—she uttered a scream of terror and shrunk back, back to the stony wall; for she saw the hideous Spider, the same ghastly, wolfish, vulture-featured object that had caused her to swoon affrighted in the upper story at her home on the bygone night.

But Jean Banquo had no sooner effected this transformation, revealing his true character—and the shriek had scarce issued from the lips of the frightened girl, when an unexpected *denouement* capped the startling tableau.

Bang! went a pistol through the crack of the door.

There was a *whiz!*—a *thud!*—the astrologer uttered a piercing, curdling wail and reeled drunkenly backward, tossing his arms and wildly clawing the air.

In the same breath, Hubert Ulster bounded into the chamber, with the smoking weapon clutched by the muzzle, ready to beat out the brains of the man he had shot.

"Abominable Spider!" he cried, excited and wrathful, "your words are lies. That bullet is from the man you have pursued and haunted and menaced for a crime he never committed! Die!—and curse you!"

CHAPTER X.

THE BEAUTIFUL SLAVE.

THE city of Cairo, in Egypt, about eleven years before the events which we have narrated.

City of glittering domes and minarets, fragrant thickets, bowers of foliage, groves of palm and gardens of dates; of wooden-latticed balconies, fountained courts, Saracenic architecture eternal and wonderful; city of hymns, symbols and spirits of imagery, spiced with the soft aromas of the Orient, redolent with the dream-songs of Persian poets and Arabic chroniclers—the magic theater of countless adventures by Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid; kissed by the dun waters of the Nile, edged by the sandy oceans of the Libyan and Arabian Deserts, track-blazed by pyramids, and lighted by a sky as hot as the breath of bubbling furnaces.

City of Al Mansur, home of the Turk, the Greek, the Jew, the Arab and the Moor; rendezvous of the Abyssinian, slave-mart of the Nubian, head-quarters of the traveler—the English, the American, the German, the French, a score of nations blending like the rivers with one commonality, curious, fantastic, grave, wretched and happy—monument of centuries, half dressed, unchanging, weirdly picturesque, the gateway to the wildly desolate and blood-scorching plains of the great Sahara.

And thither we take the reader, at a date eleven years back, to the Arab quarters, with its strange population, costumes that near a thousand years have not altered, the narrow box-like shops, the cramped stores of the omnipresent Jew—and to the office of Coco Vargas, a Spanish trader, who had amassed a large fortune by his camels, in the export and import of spices, fruits and merchandise. A dingy-looking affair—yet it was the office of Coco Vargas, the trader, who was known at every bazar, and to every donkey-driver, and whose Nubian slaves lived better than many of his own customers.

The hour, sunset. Vargas had closed his office earlier than usual, and was walking before the Great Square of Cairo, which he customarily went round on his way to his home in the Frank quarters. From the minarets came the cry; "God is great! God is merciful! Mahomet is the Prophet of God!"

But the cry, nor the hustling throng of Turks, Copts and Moderns moving to and from the narrow streetways, did not engage him. His eyes were fixed on a bow-backed Jew, a short distance ahead, whom he seemed desirous of overtaking.

Whatever were his thoughts they were not of a pleasant humor, for he frowned, he was muttering, at every step, he swung his arms, with their clinched fists, stroke like at his sides, and occasionally snarled something from his working lips, of doubloons, camels, Jews, cheats and scoundrels.

"Ho, there! Ezrontis—halt!" he called out, at length.

But the Jew did not, or would not, hear.

"Ezrontis! Jew! Thief! Swindler! Halt, I say!" and by a sudden leap, he laid his hand, heavy and iron-like, on the shoulder of the man he pursued, jerking him roughly around.

"*Caramba!* Jacob Ezrontis—I have you!"

The Jew uttered a low cry of surprise and fear; but instantly there appeared an humble grin in his weeze face, wrinkling his sparse beard nearly above his eyes, and he whined:

"Ah! Oh! Senor Vargas—my good senor—how you do to-day? I am so glad to see you! Let go of my shoulder, please."

"Ho! you grin at me, Jacob Ezrontis. Do you know who it is?—Coco Vargas, who loaned you five hundred doubloons, pure Spanish coin, thirteen months ago. You made over to me a bill against your camels and your house, and promised to return the money in six months. I have not seen you since. You have been playing hide and seek, you rogue!"

"Ah! my good Vargas, I haf travel so far. I was a rich man when I went after gum. But den I was fooled bad. I lose everything—everything. I am poor, so poor, my good Vargas; and I haf suffered a heap."

"What do I care for that?" growled the Spaniard.

"Nothing, nothing!" and Ezrontis shook his head in a sorrowful way.

"I want my dues, Jacob Ezrontis. Where are my doubloons? *Caramba!* where are the camels? Hey?"

"All gone, all gone!" wailed the Jew, dolefully, and wringing his hands. "I haf been robbed by de wild men—Bedouins—thieves—I haf nothing left. I shall starve."

"You lie, Jacob Ezrontis!—you are well-fed and fat. You vile cheat! I will have what belongs to me. You have been robbed. You have spent my doubloons and lost your camels. *Caramba!* your house—I will take your house."

"Ah! you cannot do that," said the Jew, in a mournful tone, but bowing his head to conceal the sly twinkling of his eyes. "I came back to Cairo so poor, so starving, that I be most dead. I must haf eat and drink, so I haf sell my house, that I may live."

"Infernal villain!" snapped Vargas.

"Ah! no, I am no villain, my good, my dear Vargas. I haf only been at Cairo to-day. You think I would rob you—Got! no. Tomorrow I would pay you as much and more as you gif me. I will deal so very fair. I haf something beautiful for you."

"Something beautiful? I don't want it!" Vargas gritted, tightening his hold on the shoulder of the Jew till the latter winced. "What have you got? Will it pay me as much as your camels?—as much as five hundred doubloons? Tell me that, you dog!"

"More, more, much more—Blease let go of my shoulder. It is a grand gift, my good Vargas; a slave, so like an angel, that, if she would get some wings, she would-a fly away—"

"A slave? Furies of thunder!"—and he gave a squeeze with his gripping hand that made Ezrontis squirm—"I don't want any more slaves; I have enough. What of my doubloons, Jacob Ezrontis? Tell me, or I shall send you to the devil!" and here he raised his ponderous fist under the hawkish nose of the cringing man.

"Stay, stay, my good Vargas," the Jew hastened to say, with a wry face, "wait till you haf see her. Such beauty—oh, grand!"

"*Caramba!* dogs eat you and your slave! I want my money."

"But, she is not a Nubian," Jacob persisted.

"Oh, not a Nubian?"

"Nor a Georgian."

"Nor a Georgian!" echoed Vargas.

"An English girl, my good Vargas, sweet as the princess of a harem."

"Ho! an Englishwoman. *Caramba!* Jacob Ezrontis, do you mean to tell me that you have an Englishwoman who is your slave per force of purchase?"

"Yes, yes, that is it."

"And what if I inform the consu? You will be punished, you Jew!"

"No, no, no, you would not tell—hey, good Vargas? She is for you. For you I buy her with my last piaster, this angel—lovely as the sun, fair as the rose. If you would-a see her, you go mad, you are so happy."

The cunning Jew, Ezrontis, was well aware of the soft spot in Coco Vargas's heart, who had been extravagantly fond of pretty women in his own country, and who—being once infatu-

ated to madness—had followed the daughter of an American tourist for hundreds of miles, in vain hope of finally possessing her for a wife. A man of passionate nature, he was quick to bite at the bait now offered; to talk of a woman dazzling as the sun and fair as a rose, and of English blood, was to interest him immediately.

"Let me hear that again, Ezrontis. You have a beautiful English girl"—and now he shifted his tight hold on the Jew's shoulder to a familiar pluck by the sleeve—"so lovely that she is worth more than doubloons, camels or houses?"

"Yes, my good Vargas; and she is for you. She will pay you twenty times for what you haf lose—so I will swear."

"But where did you get her?—of whom?—how?" with a fidget that betrayed jealous attempt on.

"From a wandering tribe of the Aynezeh. But when you shall come to my house, I tell you more. You shall see her."

"Yes. Haste, Ezrontis. *Caramba!* let me look at the English girl."

Vargas became suddenly calm and grave. He was thoughtful. The loan of doubloons, or their security, the camels, seemed to be forgotten; his wrath over his loss was appeased for the time. In truth, the Spaniard's imagination was already at work; he was eager to gaze on the promised prize.

The house of the Jew was not very far from the Great Square, and Vargas was not so absorbed that he failed to perceive it was in another locality than the former abode of his debtor, which convinced him that Ezrontis had, indeed, sold his old residence, either to save himself from starvation, as he affirmed, or to escape prosecution, which was most likely. Like nearly all the houses, it was built with the second story projecting over the first, supplied, also, with one of those fibrous balconies like screens of woven bark.

Entering here, Ezrontis brought forth narghilehs, and proceeded to whiff the grateful vapor. Vargas, whose impatience was unbounded and growing, waved aside the proffered hospitality, but drank copiously of sherbet, to which he helped himself.

"Be about this," he said, when he had smacked his lips over the draught. "Bring out your jewel, Ezrontis—your combined sun and rose. You lose time."

"Presently, my good Vargas," returned the Jew, as he rung a tiny bell.

A lithe young Nubian answered the summons, to whom Ezrontis gave some instructions in a low tone.

There was a long delay, and the Spaniard was moving restlessly, when the door opened again, and the Nubian returned, bearing a roll of light, rich carpet and a rug of marvelous workmanship. These he spread upon the floor before the Jew and the Spaniard; after which, he lighted a number of burners around the apartment, and softly withdrew.

"*Caramba!* Jacob Ezrontis, are we going to have a show?" grumbled Vargas, looking at the rug, at the Jew, at the mellow lamp flames that were diffusing a luscious odor through the room, and beginning to tire of waiting.

The Jew nodded his half-bald head, and smiled cunningly.

"Y-e-s," he drawled, composedly inhaling the perfumed smoke of his narghileh, "such a show you hef never see."

At that moment the door opened for the third time, and a figure appeared—a figure dressed in a black bag, as it were, and a hood of somber cowl, with the ghastly, eye-pierced mask of white worn by the women of olden Cairo.

Close behind her followed the young Nubian, turbaned and robed in brown, blue, violet and crimson, and carrying an ornamented lute, tasseled and raying with precious stones; and when she paused on the rug of golden fringe, he lingered gravely at the outer edge, where he placed for himself a tri-colored hassock.

"Furies of thunder!" blurted Coco Vargas, "what is this?—some withered old hen you would pass off under such a disguise? Kick her out! Do you take me for an ass? I'll have your life for this trick, Jacob Ezrontis!" and clinching his fists with a hiss and a snarl, he stepped quick and menacing toward the Jew.

"Stay, my good Vargas; you hef not see her yet," said the Jew, raising a hand to ward the blow of the poised fist. "You make too much haste. Presently you will think different."

As Jacob Ezrontis spoke, he made a sign to the Nubian, who, with a lightning movement, tore off the baggy dress and ghost-like mask worn by the figure, and tossed them out of sight.

"*Dios!* Look at that!" gasped the Spaniard, involuntarily.

He staggered back a pace, surprised, transfixed, thrilled to the soul.

CHAPTER XI.

COCO'S H 'MAN "COLLATERAL."

No wonder that Coco Vargas started back, that he uttered the involuntary exclamation, and experienced a thrill in every fiber of his system. The metamorphose was so unexpected, the surprise so complete and dazzling, that he did not instantly realize, but stared like one enchanted to speechlessness.

"Behold!" said the Jew, Ezrontis, "this is the gift I haf make you," and he glanced triumphant on the Spaniard, who moved not a muscle, nor for a second removed his gaze from the rare being before him.

But the woman:

Her age was not more than twenty-three. On her shapely head was a cap of crescents, studded, mistwoven, blazing with the coruscations of gems; from beneath the cap an opulence of hair, soft as down, like a massive spray of pale gold powdered with dust of silver—waving over half bared shoulders tinged like a leaf with the faint chocolate of autumn, and mingling glossily in a talismanic gorget clasped at the neck with diadems. Over an under-robe of snowy linen was a sort of dappled apron from the waist to the knees, manufactured of gorgeous material and hues; and around her waist a zone of jewels. Shoulders of silk exquisitely flowered; a short dress of nameless beauty; bracelets and armlets of highly polished metal; anklets strung with tinkling bells that sounded with every movement of the feather-weighted sandals on her feet, and bells again in her ears top studded with costly diamonds.

Her lips of red, her features radiant as her superb attire, the liquid melting of deep blue eyes beneath lashes of jet, her skin mellowed by the tropic sun and flushed with the bloom of the rose, the whole voluptuous, fascinating, royally magnificent—a picture that sent the Spaniard's blood hot and quick through his veins, and caused his vision to swim with ecstasy.

"Jacob Ezrontis!" he cried, finding voice at last. "Who is this? Where did you get her?"

"She is a daughter of the Arabs. When a babe, she haf lose her father and mother, and lif till now the slave of a sheik, for whom she sing, she dance, she play. But you shall see and hear."

Ezrontis made another sign to the Nubian, who at once seated himself on the hassock and touched the musical strings of the lute.

Instantly the picture assumed a newer elegance. The eyes of the glorious being lighted like stars, her bosom heaved—as if the notes roused to animation the soul-chords of the heart; and while her cheeks glowed crimson, her lips parted in a song, so full of melody and murmuring sweetness, that the first low ripple increased the Spaniard's admiration, awe and rapture.

"Tis the song of an Arabic maiden who, in a dream, saw herself placed within the Isle of Paradise, and woke to find herself the captive of a hostile tribe, condemned to death. Listen."

"But she sings in English!" exclaimed Vargas, who scarce dared to whisper lest he should break the spell. "How can she do so when she has been the slave and prisoner of a wild man since she was an infant? Tell me that, Jacob Ezrontis?"

"She haf been teach by an Englishman, who was den too a captive of her master, and who been killed because he made love to her," aptly replied the Jew, with an insinuating smirk. "But listen, my good Vargas—hear."

The Nubian having completed the prelude—to which the beautiful creature had been adapting her voice—she then began her song, which was entitled, "*The Sigh for Paradise.*"

At its conclusion, the Spaniard was so delighted that he clapped his hands and laughed aloud.

"I will take her! I will take her!" he cried, in a frenzy of pleasure.

"Wait, my good Vargas; you haf not known all yet."

Again the Nubian vibrated the strings of the lute, rapid, stirring, weirdly wild, and she entered into a graceful dance, skipping and posturing, and playing with castanets, while the innumerable tiny bells in her ears, on her clothing, about her ankles, all jingled unceasing and harmoniously to the time of the lively air.

"'Tis a dance with which she has tickled the sheik. Watch," said Ezrontis.

Faster and faster played the lute. There were gay snatches of song thrown in to enliven the performance, and at every turn her movements grew more animated, till the scene was one of reckless yielding to real or simulated bliss—tosses of *abandon*, waving of the bare, braceleted arms, stamping of the sandaled feet, to and fro, reeling, whirling; and louder twanged the lute, and round and round she went, darting, balancing, leaping, till at last she ceased in utter exhaustion, panting, motionless, with her two hands pressed to her throbbing breast.

"Hoho! Now den, my good Vargas, what you thinks of that—hey? Has she not do better as all the dancing girls of Cairo—oh?"

Vargas leaped to his feet.

"She is mine! *Caramba!* Jacob Ezrontis, you have not lied; she is worth more than doubloons, camels and houses. I will take her. Here is your release." Saying which he tossed the Jew a paper—the bill acknowledging the loan of five hundred doubloons—and by the act released him from all indebtedness.

The woman was re-dressed in the outlandish bag suit and mask, and going close to her, the Jew said:

"I have told you, my dear. This fine gentleman will take nice care of you. Be good to him, my dear; please him and you will have no troubles. Ah! my noble Vargas, so much obliged. And you have a grand prize. But you have not ask her name—the name of this rosy prize."

"A name? *Caramba!* I did not care for any name. What is it?"

"By the sheik she has been called 'Bulbul.' By a ring on her finger, when a little babe and captured, she must have been named 'Favia.'"

"Oh, 'Favia?' Good! I shall call her Favia. Come, my glorious Favia, you are to go with me," gently pushing her toward the door, in his eagerness to depart. They were hardly out when the Jew slammed the door shut, swung his arms aloft, and laughed with hysteric joy.

"I am free! I am free!" he gibbered. "I have now two, three, a dozen of fortunes, and he doesn't know s' much. I give him a woman whom I pay for a camel-load, worth less as dwendy, as fifty times so much as five hundred doubloons! Ha! ha! ha! She will get free, and I have not my doubloons to pay. He! he! he!"

While he chuckled gleefully, twisting his skinny hands over and over, and in and out, he tore the due-bill into a thousand fragments, and showered them round. For some time he gave himself up to vast exuberance occasioned by his very profitable release from debt.

Coco Vargas, with his prize, hurried along the streets of Cairo, in the direction of his house. It was fully night, but he seemed to avoid even the occasional lights, as if jealously apprehending that some eye might penetrate the disguise of his companion, and feast upon her heavenly beauty.

Neither uttered a word during the walk. Vargas cared not to speak; in silence, all the more intense, he was enjoying his apparent good-fortune. Yet he could scarce restrain his impatience to tear off the outer and disgusting garments Favia wore, that he might revel once more in the vision of her peerless charms. Reaching his house, he repaired at once to its best apartment, urging her to hasten at every step. When they were at last alone together, he commanded her to remove the disguise.

"Glorious Favia! Prize of wealth and sweets! This is your home. You shall live like an empress! You shall be waited upon to your heart's content!" he exclaimed, with overflowing ardor. "You have only one to please: Coco Vargas, who already worships you, who will do anything you order—angelic Favia. Carried away by his newly-awakened passion, he clasped his hands beneath his chin, and contemplated her with an intense joy, as she took off the rude screen to her loveliness.

To his surprise, his fervent avowals did not produce a smile; there was no glance of pleasure in the houri-like face; instead, as she threw aside the mask and the robe—revealing

herself to him in all her grandeur of costume, form and feature—an expression of unmistakable sadness. Throwing herself at his feet, she cried, passionately:

"Oh, Coco Vargas! for the love of Heaven be merciful. Pity, and listen to me!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BEAUTIFUL SPHINX.

COCO VARGAS was astonished at the reception of his ardent speeches. For a moment he hardly comprehended that his prize, the beautiful Favia, was kneeling in a posture of deepest supplication, looking beseechingly up at him as she uttered, or rather wailed, the words of unexpected appeal. Then:

"Hilloah! what's this? What is the matter?"

"Coco Vargas, can you not see that you have been cheated and imposed upon by Ezrontis, the Jew? I am no slave! It is not two years since I was free and happy in England, with my father and mother and kind friends. True, he bought me from fiends who at one time helped to butcher my parents. But he told you a falsehood, in saying that I have been a captive since my infancy. Listen to me, in mercy, Coco Vargas, while I explain."

"What are you talking about?" interrogated the Spaniard, engaged by her plaintive accents, and growing more surprised as he perceived tears mixing in the luster of her eyes, and marked a tremulous, wordless quivering of the ripe red lips.

"*Caramba!* you don't like the change. You would rather be the slave of Ezrontis, the bow-backed cheat of a Jew, than the queen of Coco Vargas's household. You want to go back to him. I'll give you a bowstring first! Come, sit beside me now. I must look at you closer."

"I do not want to see Ezrontis again," Favia said. "A thousand times rather be with you than him, for you may be kind, while he was brutal."

"Voice of a harp!" exclaimed the Spaniard, inwardly; and aloud: "Talk on, beautiful Favia."

They were seated beside a window overlooking a spacious court—shady and aromatic by day with palm, flower and bush—where the slaves of the Spaniard were now moving busily about, stringing lanterns at intervals, and lighting the handsome pave.

"And you will listen to me?" asked Favia.

"Forever!" he declared, with enthusiasm, and never once removing his gaze from her face.

"Then I will make my story brief—"

"Oh, a story! You are going to entertain me with a story?—some wonderful tradition of genii and fairies. Go on. I am all ears. Danseuse, songstress and story-teller! I shall name you 'Scheherazade!' How fortunate I am in possessing you!"

"Ah! it is not an idle tale merely," she said, in a mournful tone. "Too real—alas, too terribly real. About two years ago, an Englishman and his wife, named Claremont, with their daughter, left County Sussex, England, for an Eastern tour. Are you listening? On the Nubian desert they were waylaid by black Arabs, who stripped them and their party of everything. Robert Claremont was a man of quick temper, and he unhappily resisted the marauders, shooting fatally four of their number. Their wrath was roused—their motto is 'blood for blood'—and in a moment they fell upon and killed him. His wife, who bravely tried to defend him, was stricken down, bleeding and lifeless, across his dead body. The fiends who butchered the father and the mother took captive the daughter, and rode away with her, far, far over the plains of sand, bearing her to a fair oasis, where she became the slave of a sheik. In her own bright home she had been tutored by eminent masters, and excelled in song and dance; and with these accomplishments—besides a face that Heaven had molded pretty—she charmed the sheik so far that most any favor she asked was granted. By much persuasion and artful maneuvering, she kept from the pollution of his touch, and lived at least unmolested in her miserable lot. One night she managed to escape. Bridling a steed that was tame and swift, she fled from the borders of the oasis, speeding away—she knew not whither—across the sandy, moonlit seas. She had no food, nor drink, nor guide—only the spur to impel her from her horrible captors, anywhere, even if to death."

"Bravo! Excellent! What a girl to love!" broke in Vargas.

"I am that girl."

"You!"

"Throughout the night, and nearly all the next day, I pricked my faithful horse onward, though he was near dead with fatigue, and I was stiff in the draperies of the saddle. Hungry and tired at last, blind with thirst, and my poor horse staggering under that scorching sun, I paused in my flight and sunk helplessly to the hot sands, shrieking for water."

"*Caramba!* what a fix! Go on."

"When I again opened my eyes judge of my horror—my regret that I had not indeed perished—at the sight of two terrible-faced blacks kneeling over me, moistening my lips and bathing my brow with water. Having restored me to consciousness, they retired a short distance and conversed lowly together. As I watched them in the moonlight—too weak to raise myself and scarce able to speak—I overheard and comprehended much of what they said. By frequent mention of my name, 'Bulbul,' I knew that they belonged to the tribe from which I had fled; more, they had recognized me. I fully expected to be carried again into captivity, where, I could but realize, I would be horribly punished. But presently one of them lifted me onto his horse, and both mounting, they dashed off at a gallop. I feigned myself weaker than I really was, for I feared they might compel me to walk. I had seen examples of their brutality before."

"It was not long ere I discovered their intention. After riding for an hour thus, I saw a number of scattered lights ahead, and could distinguish camels, horses, people and tents. We were approaching a caravan that had halted for the night. My heart bounded with hope. How soon my anticipations were dispelled! We halted some distance from the caravan—where I could plainly see the Turkish merchants sitting on their carpets by the fires, travelers smoking their pipes, the sleeping camel-drivers, and imams prostrating themselves at the invocation of prayer. One of the blacks entered the encampment. He returned soon, and I was carried a roundabout way to a large tent. Here I was shown to Jacob Ezrontis, the Jew, with whom the blacks seemed to be acquainted. He bought me of them for a camel and its load, and a few coins. They must have informed him of what I could do, as he made me dance and sing for him almost before I had recovered my strength, and kept it up at every halt of the caravan. At night I was closely confined to the tent, guarded by some of his servants, and when mounted on my dromedary, I was threatened with instant death if I appealed to any one, and kept veiled till recognition of even the color of my skin was impossible."

"To all this I made no demur. I had conceived new hopes. Learning that his destination was Cairo, I thought that, once here, I could get an interview with the Consul, and eventually rejoice in liberty. Again I was disappointed. I have been under strict surveillance and terrible threats ever since arriving here, and to night is the first time I have been permitted to walk the street."

As Favia concluded her brief recital, she bowed her face to her hands, and Vargas saw that she was weeping.

"Beautiful Favia!" he said, snatching both her hands and squeezing them warmly in his own; "they were beasts, vipers, devils—all! Think of them no more. Do not shed tears; but laugh and be merry—laugh, glorious Favia. How lucky that you have come to Coco Vargas!"

She glanced quick and eagerly into his face; the sparkle of her magnificent eyes was redoubled in the spirit of hope which his words created.

"Then you will be merciful? You will see the Consul at once, and have me restored to my home and kindred?—send me back to England?"

"What?"—as if doubting his ears, and drawing away astounded. "Furies of thunder! no. Ridiculous! you are mine. You are to live with me. You shall reign a queen; but you belong to Coco Vargas."

Again the tears gushed from her eyes; again she sunk to her knees in an imploring attitude—more despairing, more emotional than formerly.

"No, no, no!" she wailed; "let me go! Do not subject me to further tortures."

"Tortures! It is luxury."

"I have suffered enough, Heaven knows, in the last two years. Are you pitiless?—will not prayers nor gold move you? I have property in England. I will pay you what will people a harem for you. Only my liberty—my liberty—grant me that."

"*Caramba!* stop this!" exclaimed the Spaniard. "A harem?—the jewels you wear would buy two. I marvel that Ezrontis did not strip you of them before he gave you over to me; they are, themselves, worth more than what he owed me. But I have bought you for a slave. You are mine, I say. Look, now; I will do better"—and he smiled and spoke persuasively—"You shall be my wife. Think how elegant!—the wife of Vargas, the wealthy trader. How enviable! You will—ha!"

"Monster!" cried Favia, springing suddenly to her feet, "I had hoped to find in you a man of feeling, to sympathize with me in my extreme of misery. Are your countrymen all so brutish and abominable? You have no right to fetter me. There is a way to punish you, and Heaven will aid me. I will escape you yet!" and she crossed several times, delivering her words rapidly, flashing scorn, defiance and danger from her lustrous orbs.

"Hol! here is a different picture," ejaculated the astonished man. "My angel has turned devil! What do you mean, slave?"

For she paused and stood, flushed and quivering with emotion, her glorious beauty rendered more royally brilliant by excitement, dumfounding and stupefying him.

"Hol! you are showing the bitter of your sweet, eh?"

"I am not unlike other mortals, Coco Vargas. I am orphaned and unfortunate, and in my appeal to your heart, I find it is made of stone, and your soul is the soul of a villain."

"*Caramba!*"

"No less than a villain! Beware! Favia Claremont is not all beauty. The gem you hold may turn to a bur."

"The devil! I shall tame you pretty quick," sputtered Vargas, in rising passion.

Starting up, he stepped forward as if to grasp her by the arm.

"Touch me if you dare!" she cried. "Another step, Coco Vargas, and you are a dead man."

A deadly flash lighted her eyes; he could see her white, pearly teeth clinched almost savagely; and as she warned him off, she circled a gleaming poniard before his eyes, grasping the jeweled hilt with a determined rigidity.

"So you will 'tame' me?" she hissed, ironically. "You think you will subdue and mold me to your wishes. Beware of this, then!" flourishing the poniard quickly at him, and causing him to jump backward; "for I have learned its use from teachers who do not sicken at the sight of blood. Look out for your life, wretch!"

The Spaniard was in a rage, but the glittering steel held him at a distance.

"Put down that knife, you Sphinx!" he shouted, fairly dancing and gripping at the empty air, as if his fingers were beset by serpents. "Down with it before I wring your neck! *Caramba*, do you not fear me? I am Coco Vargas. I will tear you to pieces if you madden me. Down with that knife!"

"I will not! The point shall prick your heart if you come nigh me! Fear you?—no! Approach me if you dare!"

He wheeled abruptly, and took long strides toward the door. Here he paused, and shook his fist furiously at the defiant woman.

"Yes, I shall tame you!" he roared. "Wait, devil! cat! Sphinx! Oh, wait"—gritting his teeth till they seemed likely to snap; and unable to further articulate in his rage at her momentary triumph, he departed, banging and locking the door after him.

When alone, Favia restored the knife to her bosom, and a change came over her. Throwing herself on one of the luxurious settles, she sobbed hysterically. Woman withal, she yielded to her unhappy feelings when the artificial strength that had sustained her through the ordeal relaxed in solitude.

"Wretched, wretched fate!" she moaned. "Oh, what is to become of me at last? Am I never to return to dear old England? Am I to be forever miserable in this barbarous country? Sooner death! for my faith is shaken. But wed this Coco Vargas, whom I already detest!"—and here she started upright on the settle, grasping its cushioned sides spasmodically, while her eyes flashed anew through her tears. "Never! He may make me his slave,

to wait upon and humor him; but he shall not touch me. *Never!*"

Again, and for several moments, her regal head bowed to her hands in silence; then she murmured, in a broken, plaintive way:

"Oh, Gilbert—Gilbert Montrose! why have you not sought for me? Why have you not turned earth and Heaven to find me, as I would have done for you? You have heartlessly forgotten me—perhaps wedded another, who can never love you as I have loved you, Gilbert Montrose!"

She was interrupted by the entrance of a leather-skinned, turbaned and pantaletted old woman, who said, advancing toward her:

"I have come to try and please the favorite of my master, and to rejoice with you in your good fortune. Truly you are 'Favia the Beautiful!'"

"Are you a subject of this wretch of a Spaniard?"

"My name is Telesta. I keep the house of Coco Vargas, the wealthy trader, who is a kind and liberal master," replied the woman. "I am to advise you, for your own good, not to anger him, and teach you that he is supreme ruler within these walls."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

A STRANGE nature was that of Favia Claremont—one that sustained her in hardship, captivity and forlorn distress, where creatures less iron-tempered would have languished, pined, or perished, preserving her marvelous beauty throughout; nerving her to defy her last persecutor, Coco Vargas, and still maintain, with indomitable will, a character of bravery that was to stand her in good need in future events.

Just as she had come from her slavedom in the oasis of the sheik, without the loss of a single jewel, diadem or thread of apparel, so had the Jew, Ezrontis, given her over to the Spaniard; and Vargas was doubly reimbursed for his loan of money by the gems she wore, and by his enviable possession of one so lovely.

A week passed, and Favia had not left the confines of the apartment to which she had been conducted on the night of her first entrance into the trader's house. The Spaniard did not intrude upon her; she seemed left entirely to the companionship of Telesta, who had the room converted into a bed-chamber, and supplied with every convenience of comfort and necessity.

She had seen far uglier women than Telesta, during the months she was a captive, and contrast with them made her present companion less repulsive. But she soon discovered that Telesta was, in reality, a guard, a jailer over her, and admirably suited to the office—ever watchful, shrewd, of set habits and unbending disposition.

For two successive nights Favia refused to sleep. But nature, yielding at last, precipitated, also, by drugs, she succumbed; and while oblivious in slumber, the sharp dagger, her sole dependence, was taken from her.

As the days went by, even this monotony grew wearisome. Many of weaker spirit might have despaired, and, made reckless by mad impulse, thrown themselves from the broad window to the pave below, thus terminating an unhappy imprisonment. Not so with Favia, who, in the prime beauty and vigor of her years, felt that she had much to live for, that fortune, or Providence, might yet relieve her dull fate, and transport her to a brighter existence.

The last of seven days was drawing to a close. Favia was seated by the window, looking out upon the court, listlessly following with her eyes the slaves of Coco Vargas moving to and fro. She was silent and pensive. Telesta sat near, embroidering on some fancy stuffs; not so much engrossed, however, as to prevent her watching every movement of the prisoner with cat-like intensity.

"Telesta!" she exclaimed, suddenly, starting from the cushions, "I can endure this no longer. Send word to Coco Vargas that I will try to please him." For she had been thinking the last few moments: "The part I am playing is a foolish one. I may never find opportunity to escape this Spaniard if I continue my present course. Better to act lies and deceive him, and thus gain the opportunity I desire."

The hag-woman's eyes sparkled with satisfaction.

"You do well," she said. "My master will be kind to you."

Going to the door, which was invariably

locked on the outside, and generally guarded by an additional slave, she signaled to be let out.

"Go straightway to our master," she commanded the Nubian whom she found there, and tell him that Favia, the Beautiful, waits to receive him."

And when the slave was gone upon the mission, she proceeded to attire her charge in fresh and gorgeous apparel, for the Spaniard had himself superintended the furnishing of a magnificent wardrobe for the woman he meant to make his wife eventually.

At the expiration of an hour Vargas appeared, radiant with pleasurable anticipations. Telesta withdrew, and refreshments were ordered up, over which, with the sparkling stimulus of choice wine, and the entertaining smiles and brilliant conversation of his captive, the Spaniard grew gay and talkative, completely banishing all recollection of the first night's angry tableau.

Favia simulated with wonderful effect, and almost immediately convinced him that she was ready to please him in every thing; that thoughts of escape were far from occupying her mind; that, in short, she was resolved to do whatever he wished, to the extent of her abilities.

The first step toward a shrewd woman's plans.

Vargas had every thing which other people of wealth had, and many things which they had not; among the latter, a volante, which he had imported, and this, drawn by a mare, a rare animal in Cairo, upon whose superior qualities he boasted.

The volante was ordered, and with Favia, glowing, glorious, superb Favia, seated beside him, he rode out and around where there was less crowd and more of note to be seen.

The intensest heat of the day was past, and in the waning afternoon he amused her with pointing out objects of interest, intermingled with digressions of amorous sentiment and boundless flatteries. To all of which, she listened with affected readiness, and replied with gracious appreciation.

"Lucky Vargas!" he thought; "she is mine! She accepts her fate, and I am the happiest dog alive. My wife will be the loveliest woman that ever breathed the airs of the city of Cairo!" and such promising reflections began to absorb him continuously.

"What place is that?" she asked, pointing to an odd-looking shop before which they were passing—a bow window disordered with busts and statuettes, and an interior strewn with curious blocks.

"That?—oh, the shop of an English model-maker. An architect, also, who is at this minute preparing a plan for my new house."

"Another house?"

"Yes, one for ourselves; where you will have more that is beautiful around you. Shall we stop and see him?"

A strange thought ran in the mind of Favia Claremont just then, something like this:

"An English model-maker! What if it is Gilbert—Gilbert Montrose? Can it be possible that he has left his shop in Chichester, County Sussex, and wandered here in search of me? Could Heaven be so kind as to bring us together thus? I dare not hope it!" And aloud: "Yes, Coco, let us stop. I want to see what there is to see, of course. I notice that your model-maker is also a sculptor."

"His shop is a gallery of rare specimens. Come, here we are."

Leaving the conveyance with the slave who rode the mare, they entered the shop.

The model-maker was at work with mallet and chisel. Looking up from his bench, and perceiving visitors, he advanced to receive them.

"Senor Vargas, I am pleased to see you," he began, bowing respectfully; but he paused, turned pale.

And simultaneously the Spaniard uttered a low cry.

"Hol! what's this? A glass of water—quick, there, sir model-maker! she is fainting."

Favia, with eyes starting and face whitened, was tottering dizzily. But she did not faint. As Vargas sprang to sustain her, and as he turned his head for an instant while he called for the water, she made a sign to the model-maker, accompanying it with a look, and the sign and the look plainly said:

"Gilbert Montrose, I know you! Do not appear to recognize me, or all is lost!"

"What is it?" demanded the Spaniard,

frightened by her behavior. "Are you sick?—no? Then what has happened?"

"Nothing, Coco—nothing much. I sprained my ankle by stepping on that block there."

"Accursed block!" exclaimed Vargas, kicking it aside in a fury. "Why do you have such things lying around, sir model-maker? You will break the limbs of your best customers. *Caramba!*"

"I am sorry—very sorry, indeed," apologized the model-maker, placing the offensive block out of sight under a shelf. "And I hope you have not sustained any great injury, madam?"

"Let us go, Coco," urged Favia, avoiding the question and the gaze of the young model-maker—for she was so excited she durst not look at him without danger of betraying the true cause of her sudden uneasiness. "Let us not tarry any longer. My foot begins to pain already. I fear I may be unable to walk at all, presently."

"*Caramba!* we are hardly in when we must retreat. And you wanted to see the curiosities. But, come—malediction on the block!"

As they passed the door, Vargas halted to inquire:

"When is that diagram, or whatever you call it, to be done?"

"You shall have it in two days, Senor Vargas."

"Very good. When it is finished, bring it directly to my office and I will pay you."

When the volante had departed, the model-maker ran quickly to the door. There was a glass window in the door, and on the glass were two words—scratched with one of the rings Favia wore, in the brief moment of question and answer between the model-maker and his patron.

"The words were:

"FOLLOW US!"

And when Gilbert Montrose read them—for it was Gilbert Montrose, whose seeming neglect Favia had chided, and who had been her accepted lover before she left her home near the banks of the Rother—he uttered a cry of joy.

"'Tis she! 'Tis she! My own, my long-lost Favia!"

Exchanging his jacket and paper cap in a twinkling for a coat and hat, he locked the door of his shop and bounded along the street in pursuit of the volante.

"Does your ankle pain a great deal?" Vargas inquired, solicitously, as they rode slowly along.

"Really, I am ashamed of myself," she answered, laughing; "I begin to think it was no sprain, after all, and that I have been more frightened than hurt. Whatever it was, I hardly feel it now," and in this she spoke the truth—for even if her ankle was sprained—which it was not—she was too overjoyed at the moment to mind it.

She had glanced carelessly back through the tiny glass transom of the volante-cover, and saw Gilbert Montrose trailing them, winding in and out amid the throng.

"God in Heaven be thanked! I shall soon be free!" fell like a prayerful whisper from her lips.

Slowly onward went the vehicle, and behind it, like a bound on scent and in sight of his quarry, followed Gilbert Montrose, the model-maker.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL FOR LOVE AND ALL FOR HATE.

RETURNING to the house of Coco Vargas, a sumptuous feast was spread in the pillared dining-hall, after which they walked in the spacious court, where he showed his beautiful companion the many unique features of the estate, upon which had been lavished wealth without regard to limit.

And truly, the home of the trader was a lovely one, with its gates, broad entries, massive doors, luxurious furnishings, and display of gold and silver ornaments on the inside; its garden, its handsomely-paved court—with a fountain, and a shed-like extension of cambered trellis entirely round the inclosure of high walls, and these coverings supplied with settles—its constant atmosphere of perfumes, and general order of neatness that attested how well drilled were his slaves and servitors.

After the walk, an hour of delightful amusement in the room that was erst used as a prison—regalings of conversation, and a refresh-

ment of light delicacies such as sweeten the glamor of Oriental fables and excite the envy of souls born in less sunny climes.

The night advanced. Vargas had withdrawn, happy beyond parallel. When he lay upon his couch it was not to seek sleep; his mind was too full of his good fortune and the prospects of still greater bliss. Favia had promised to become his wife, his "queen;" that very day, one week hence, was fixed for the celebration of the nuptials, and the picture of the approaching fete was already painted, grand and gorgeous, in his imagination.

And of Favia?—who was far from intending that anything of the kind should transpire, and who felt assured that her release from the power of the man she despised was now but a question of so many hours. Would Gilbert Montrose rescue her without delay?—or might he prove tardy, and the day actually arrive when she must fulfill her pledge to the expectant Spaniard? This thought was torment.

The hour grew late. Telesta—still her companion, but no longer jailer, for the door was not fastened—slumbered in her accustomed place across the foot of the couch used by her mistress.

Favia sat by the window. She was restless and worried. As she gazed listlessly outward through the luminous night—upon the court now stripped of its gay lanterns, upon the fountain that gurgled like a spout of silver in the moonlight, upon the merging shadows of the palms, and upon the numerous tiny lights, that twinkled like the stars in the black-blue sky, in sight beyond the high walls of the court—the air of solitude, the strange, weird stillness of night's noontide, served to weave deeper the spell into which she was cast; a turbid, musing melancholy girt with hope.

Presently there was a quick start, a partial opening of the mouth, as if to vent some smothered exclamation of surprise. Her eyes were riveted on the court below, and her gaze seemed straining to pierce the gloom beneath the cambered trellis. She saw a figure there—a stealthy form that flitted, that paused, that was drawing nigh the window, keeping within the screen of darkness, and it was a man.

"It is Gilbert!" she murmured. "None, save the watchman is ever astir in the court at this late hour. It must be Gilbert," and while her heart thumped till she feared its beating would awaken Telesta, she clinched her jeweled hands upon the sill, holding her breath, half startled, half eager.

The crouching form came nearer. Silent as the tread of a cat were the footfalls of the spectral personage. Nearer still; now he stood under the window.

In another moment—and while Favia was hesitating whether to challenge him, something hurtled upward, striking the pane and the sill and rolling noisily to the floor. A pebble.

"Ah! what was that?" demanded Telesta, drowsily.

"Nothing, nothing, Telesta; I—I dropped one of my rings."

"Hunh!" grunted the woman, rolling over and relapsing, apparently, again into profound repose.

The casting of the pebble was a signal; it was certainly Gilbert Montrose.

While undecided what to do, a second pebble whizzed in at the window, which fell squarely, and without noise, in her lap.

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" she called, in a whisper so low that she hardly heard herself, and leaning over the sill in trepidation.

"Favia! Dear, dear Favia!" came in answer from below.

"Oh! be careful, Gilbert—another noise like that, and all is lost. Save me, Gilbert! For the sake of our love, get me out of this vile place!"

"I am here to rescue you, dear Favia—"

"Careful. Oh! you cannot be too cautious. I am not alone. Telesta, my guard, sleeps not twelve feet from me; the least loud word will awake her."

All this in whispers softer than sighing wind, and not loud enough for the ears of Telesta, alert as she ever was, asleep or waking.

"Dear Favia, I have a rope-ladder. We must be rapid as well as cautious, for once in every two hours a slave inspects the court and its postern—"

"Yes, yes, and it is now over an hour since I saw him moving about with his lantern. What are we to do?"

"Listen. To one end of the ladder I have tied a ball of twine. If you are nimble, you

may catch it as I throw it to you. Are you ready? So."

He tossed the ball with precision, and Favia caught it without difficulty. In the same moment she began hauling in—hauling slowly, and glancing toward the bed, dreading the slightest rustle of her skirts.

"I have it, Gilbert."

"There is a hook. Fasten it under the sill on the inside."

When she had done as he directed, he began to ascend. Soon he was with her—then a long fond, passionate embrace, the kisses of lovers so long separated and now nearly overcome with joy. But there was no time to be lost.

"Throw a cloak over your shoulders, dear Favia—and hasten. The postern is open; if Heaven favors us, we shall soon be free and reunited."

Removing her light slippers, Favia hurried to obey. It did not occupy many seconds. And! all the while, her heart was full and joyous in this verge of delivery from a hated durance.

"Ready, dear Gilbert. Now."

"Now!" he echoed, hushedly.

But she had no sooner placed her knee upon the sill, when there rose such a wild, piercing scream in the apartment that their blood fairly curdled.

Telesta—who had been wide awake since hearing the fall of the first pebble—sprung like an enraged fiend from the bed and launched herself upon Gilbert Montrose.

"Tigress!" he exclaimed, maddened by the discovery, and nigh choked by her desperate gripe. "Tigress! loose my throat. Off, here! Fly, Favia—fly!"

But, though the model-maker strained till his veins seemed bursting, he could not break the tenacious claws of the brawny arms around his body. Like the coil of a snake, the woman grappled him, and yelled lustily for help—an alarm that rung loud and shrill, and echoed and re-echoed through the stilly surrounding.

The slaves of the household were not easily aroused. But Coco Vargas, tossing restless and wakeful on his uncomfortable pillow, leaped from his bed as if pricked with a cineter. Hurriedly slipping on a gown, he grasped up a candelabra and rushed to the scene of confusion, straight to Favia's room, whence issued the succession of shrieks and calls, mingled with a man's rough voice.

"Ho-o! Telesta! What is all this disturbance about?" he shouted, dashing in and waving the light before him.

Then he uttered another and a different shout. There was a bright gleam within an inch of his eyes, something descended with the quickness of a lightning-shaft, and the candelabra crashed from his hand to the floor.

"*Caramba!* I am stabbed!" he groaned, and clutching blindly in the darkness, he sunk down wet with blood.

The blow was from a fruit knife, which Favia had snatched from among the remnants on the table. Immediately upon delivering the terrible stroke, she sprung over the fallen body, bounding from the apartment, and fleeing at random through the murky hall.

"Down a flight of stairs, along another entry; then she reached a door. Passing the door, she found herself in the court, directly beneath the window of the room she had just left, and where there was now a brilliant glare of light and the hum of many voices.

With all the swiftness of which she was capable, she sped toward the postern. She saw the watch-slave hastening forward—she lent her every energy to escape from the court ere the light of his lantern and the full moonbeams betrayed her to him.

Then her heart gave a bound of horror. Some one was close behind, steadily pursuing her. She could hear the patter of feet drawing closer. But she did not look back.

"Murderess! halt there!" ordered a familiar voice.

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" she panted, stopping instantly.

She was at the postern, with one hand on the iron grating.

"Oh, Gilbert! How did you escape?"

"Without doing murder!" he answered, in a cold, stern accent, and brushing past her.

"Gilbert—stay! What ails you? What do you mean by that tone?"

They were outside the wall, free, alone in the flood-light of the moon; she clung tightly to his arm, startled by his strange, chilly words.

He took her head between his hands, and

gazed down into the glorious face for a second in silence. There was an expression nearly savage in his features; when he spoke the syllables grated harshly on her ear, cutting like daggers to her heart.

"Favia Claremont," he cried, "I have made you my idol. For two long years I searched as man never searched before to find the woman he loved. God, in His infinite mercy, brought us together, and I was happy. But I am now miserable. My love has congealed to ice. I almost hate you!"

"Gilbert!—merciful Heaven! what can this mean?" gasped Favia.

"It means"—fiercely—"that I can never wed a woman who comes to me with her hands dyed in human blood!"

"No, no, no; I am no murderess! It was in self-defense I killed him—ay, it was to save your life, dear Gilbert!"

"No matter. It is murder. I could have rescued you without its need."

"Gilbert! Gilbert! this is madness!"

"Madness too real. Do not touch me. Let our loves wither here and forever. Farewell—murderess!"

lanterns here and there, and some of them approaching the postern—she shut her white teeth firmly, and glided away, keeping close in to the wall, pursuing an opposite direction to that taken by her singularly recreant lover.

Next day, the shop of Gilbert Montrose, the model-maker, was closed. He was never seen in Cairo afterward; he left his tools and the contents of the shop precisely as they were when he had locked the door and trailed after his betrothed, for whom he had searched two years, and whom he was so soon to lose again by his own hasty act.

And Favia, with the copious cloak wrapped hastily about her—for she wore the magnificent suit of jewels in which she had been bought by Vargas—was *en route* for Atfeh. She had put on the suit to please the Spaniard in the early evening. It was a lucky action. There was a fortune in it, by which she could command money to carry her to her home in England.

Had the hand that dealt the knife-blow been steadier, and the cut of the blade sunk deeper,

have conduced to its further inflammation, and the Spaniard was eager for the trail to his revenge. On the third day, too, one of his slaves—he had them out in all directions, on the alert for a clew to the flight of Favia—came to him with the intelligence that she had departed toward Atfeh.

It required but a short time for Coco Vargas to adjust his business. In three hours he had sold his trade, horses, camels, goods, house—all at a tremendous sacrifice—liberated his slaves, paid his servants; in three hours more he left Cairo, his pockets and his trunks jammed with money, and bearing valuable papers from the British consul.

As he sat on the deck of the *kanzia*, whiffing vigorously at his pipe of Latakiah—having paid a grizzly *rais* liberally to make all haste—he was muttering destruction on Favia Claremont, the Sphinx!

He was on the right scent. But upon reaching Atfeh—and despite his ready-working servants—Favia eluded him. She discovered his presence, and fled in dismay, knowing full well what must be the object of his pursuit. After a vain search for her person, he acciden-



"I AM HERE FOR VENGEANCE. TAKE THAT FOR THE STAB YOU GAVE ME!"

Was he raving? Favia stared, palsied in tongue and limb.

Throwing off her clasp, leaving that last burning, terrible word ringing in her incredulous ears, he fled across an open space by the wall, into an alleyway beyond.

For an instant she stood like a frozen statue. Her eyes, wide and frightened, followed his receding form till it was lost to view. Then, sudden as his own change, more fierce than his own renunciation of troth, her face grew rigid, her lips compressed; the latent iron of her nature tingled in passion through her every vein.

"Base, heartless Gilbert Montrose!" she muttered huskily; "to save your life, I killed Coco Vargas—for your discovery in my chamber would have been your death, had he lived to lay hold of you. For that, I am called a murderess!—and by you, the only man I ever loved! Go. Desert me. As your love has died, so has mine. You have trampled out its every spark. Heaven grant that I may never meet you again—for I, too, can hate. Oh! what a world of men—so soulless, ay, so abominable!"

Rousing quickly to a realization of her surrounding—for just then she perceived a number of slaves scouring the court, flashing

it would have been more fortunate for Favia Claremont.

The wound that Vargas had received was by no means dangerous, though its accompanying sensations momentarily deprived him of consciousness. Being removed to his bed—where the ugly gash in his right breast was aptly dressed by Telesta, who had a vast knowledge of medicine—he was soon easy and talkative, though his mood and speeches were fevered by rage when he learned that Favia had escaped him.

For two days he was not permitted to arise; and in his absolute helplessness he lay and raved madly, muttering maledictions on the woman who had stabbed him. As he had before adored Favia Claremont with a passion of delight bordering on frenzy, he now hated her with the menacing thought of a demon. He vowed to retaliate with torture and annihilation; he swore, by every imp in Pandemonium, to be revenged—his very impatience feeding fuel to his anger-racked breast, like a starved lion growing more ravenous every minute that detains it from its meal.

On the third day he was astir. The wound was far from being healed, but its sorest irritation was over, notwithstanding all that might

tally learned that she was on the way to Alexandria.

"To Alexandria!" he shouted, re-engaging the same vessel that brought him to Cairo. "To China, to America, to the end of the world—anywhere! Revenge! Death to Favia Claremont, the Sphinx!"

And discharging his servants, he pursued his track of vengeance alone, his wound smarting keen and hot at this baffling of his first swoop.

CHAPTER XV.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

THE scene of our narrative shifts to county Sussex, England—to the banks of the infant river Rother, not far from its entering the Channel at the flourishing borough of Rye.

In the vicinity mentioned were three estates: *Wirthmoor*, *Ulster Manor*, and *Claremontwilde*—the latter the smallest, nearest the waters of the Rother; and the three, by their relative positions and boundaries, forming a sort of triangle that was known, in a past generation as the "Angle of Sussex."

Since the departure of Robert Claremont, his wife and child, for that tour in Egypt which resulted in the murder of the parents and the captivity of the daughter—news of which had

been received—Claremontwilde had not been permitted to degenerate altogether from its reputation of cheerfulness, owing to the intelligence and number of old, devoted servants, who firmly believed that young Favia would some day return and assume control, and who successfully defied the attempts of money-grabbing lawyers to transfer the property to distant and clamorous relatives of the deceased.

Two months had elapsed since the events detailed in our last chapter.

There was rejoicing and festivity at Claremontwilde. The season was verging on Christmas too, and it seemed that the holiday must be already commenced, for there were wreaths of holly and mistletoe broadcast—the tint of frost was on the ground and the trees, and the butler was busy directing subordinates who opened and set running the sweet, sparkling wine, and distributed dainty treats to a swarm of gay men and women.

Favia, the long-absent and nearly despaired-of heir, had arrived suddenly in their midst!

Due production of her father's will—the hid-

mare! Would that I had, indeed, been the murderess Gilbert Montrose believed me, and for which he so villainously deserted me. Merciful Heaven! I cannot live this way. Is there no means, no trick—*whatever* it may be—to save me from the vengeance of Coco Vargas?"

The resources of woman's wit were tasked till her brain wearied and ached. Hour after hour was spent in solitude; she chose no companion, not even the little French maid, who had waited upon Mademoiselle Favia when she was a child, was admitted to her society more than necessary; and all the while she was thinking, contriving, building plan upon plan only to relinquish them as of no permanent avail, until at last, she despaired and saw no safety except in a renewal of her flight and a crooked trail.

To abandon Claremontwilde was to give up her heritage, according to the will; but she could sell the jewels of her Oriental costume, which would sustain her for a long period.

This resolution she arrived at. To think with Favia Claremont was to act! She had

"At length I see a plan to elude this abominable Spaniard. Tyron Wirth annoyed me two years ago with his offers of marriage—he a deformed, crooked, dwarfish, hideous thing, so horrifying to the sight, that people have christened him the 'Spider of Wirthmoor'—more repulsive than the Babe of Stanislaus. Fortune favors me. I will use the love of the Spider! Tyron Wirth shall rid me forever of Coco Vargas!"

Completing a magnificent toilet to aid her in her object, she descended to receive her pigmy visitor.

He hardly waited for her to advance, but stepping forward, took her extended hand, and sunk to one knee in an attitude of worship.

"Dear, glorious Favia!" he cried, eagerly, "do not reprove me because I have been the last to welcome you back. The hated Spider of Wirthmoor would not intrude upon the gay company who have paid constant court since you returned. I have waited for this—to see you alone. I wanted to have you entirely to myself, to tell you how glad I am, and to hope you had not forgotten me."



A QUICK GLANCE DISCOVERED THE DWARFED, IMPISH, SATANIC-FEATURED THING THAT HAD APPEARED IN THE WALL

ing-place of which she alone knew—had definitely settled all controversy, and in a few days the place was lively as its wont three years earlier.

But Favia, the center of all the merrymaking—and promptly overseeing the reorganization of many neglected affairs—took but a weak part in her surrounding of a re-brightened home.

She knew that Coco Vargas was alive, that he was pursuing her under the smart of the stab she had given him in Cairo, that he was mad for vengeance, and persistent as a specter demon.

The knowledge preyed upon her constantly. Moreover, she had unfortunately given him a history of herself by which he would now be able to trace her to her home and strike at her before she could take precautions as a shield from his venomous hatred.

"Such torment is unbearable," she would mutter anon, with frown-knit brows. "Am I to have this human devil hounding upon my trail forever—to murder me, no doubt, in revenge? Would that my aim had been truer, that my knife had pricked his heart, then I would not have to endure this terrible night-

immediately begun preparations for the flight, when one afternoon the French maid brought her a card announcing a visitor.

The name on the card was:

"TYRON WIRTH."

And upon reading it, she crumpled it instantly in her hand, exclaiming impatiently:

"Tyron Wirth! That frightful wretch! Is he going to hunt me again?"

"Oui, mademoiselle. The ugly Spider of Wirthmoor! He has come again. It is one of the dreadful things you must meet, now you have returned to Claremontwilde. I wish he was dead, mademoiselle, he is so ugly."

But Favia heard not the closing speech of the maid. The card dropped absently from her hand, and a strange, indefinable expression came over her face.

"Jeanette! Jeanette!" she cried, in excitement, "hasten down and say that I will see him directly. Hurry, Jeanette."

For there had flashed a wonderful thought into her mind, one that made her even eager to see the distasteful Spider of Wirthmoor.

She laughed hysterically when the maid was gone.

"Forgotten you?" thought Favia, scarce able to conceal her disgust as she gave ear to his words and looked down into his wolfish face. "I would have a poor memory if I forgot such a hideous thing as you." And aloud: "I forgive your tardiness, Tyron. I am pleased to see you. Be seated," smiling graciously on the dwarfed being, and motioning him to a seat beside her on the sofa.

"Ha!" exclaimed the Spider, inwardly, "two years ago it was 'hateful Spider,' and 'imp of ugliness,' and 'Satan-of-earth'; now it is 'Tyron.' What has so changed her? How pleasant [she is]!"—and sitting beside her, he fixed his small, glittering eyes on her lovely face with an intensity that was disagreeable to Favia, who endured it.

Refreshments were ordered. She had a great object in entertaining the Spider courteously. Nor did she waste any time in coming to the point of her purpose.

"You have heard, Tyron"—picking idly at the rich cake, and sipping leisurely of the wine set before them—"of the butchery of my father and mother in Egypt?"

"Yes. How mournful! You have my deep sympathy." And he hardly touched the

cake or the wine, so occupied were his eyes and his mind with Favia.

"And I am now left alone in the world. Is it not sad, Tyron?" pursued the beauty.

"What can she mean by that sigh?" muttered the Spider, *sotto voce*, still regarding her fixedly, and feeling in excellent spirits; for it may be seen that Tyron Wirth had presumed, at a former time, to aspire to the hand and love of Favia Claremont, and his reception at this moment was in marvelous contrast with the treatment he had encountered in the past.

"Tyron," she said, simulating much hesitation, "some two years ago you asked me to marry you—"

"I did! I did!" he put in quickly, and grinning as if thrilled by her broaching a desirable topic. "I offered you wealth double your own, though I am hated and ugly; I told you I could make you happy—I would be so devoted, so dog-like, in obeying your commands."

"I spurned you then, because other people despised you—"

"Other people! And did not you?"

"No, Tyron."

"Favia! dear, glorious Favia! can it be possible?"

A silence ensued. Favia was artful. She saw that her words animated him with pleasure; she would allow the effect to work. It was not long.

The Spider cast himself again at her feet, clasping her hands in his own and pressing them warmly. For a moment half his ugliness vanished in a glow of supreme happiness. His little eyes burned, his voice was husky with joy.

"Favia! oh Favia! you did not despise me!—then you did not think unkindly of me. Tell me; what is this? Am I to hope? Can it be true that, at last, you will love me—the Spider of Wirthmoor? You will be my wife? Oh, this is bliss! You are the only woman to whom I ever knelt, whom I ever dared to love. You are going to make my lot something to live for—I know you are. Speak! Do you mean to encourage me? Dear, glorious Favia, speak!"

"Tyron, I will love you—"

"Heaven of bliss!" he cried.

"I may be your wife—"

"Oh, joy!" and his dwarfed, kneeling form trembled beyond control.

"Upon one condition," added Favia, with emphasis, and gazing hard into the gleaming eyes of her impish adorer.

"Name it—anything—I will do it."

"Hear, then! I have an enemy—a terrible, murderous enemy,"—she spoke rapid, sharp, almost hissing—"who has pursued me on account of my beauty, since the day I escaped my captors in the desert. He has sworn to either make me his wife, or to kill me. I fear him. I am too weak, alone, to defy him. You are a match for him, for you are strong and bold. Upon condition that you will remove this enemy forever from my path, I will be your promised bride."

A contortion of anger now worked in the features of the dwarf. To know that the woman he worshiped was hunted down by a man who had sworn to kill or to marry her—a rival whom she herself dreaded—instantly excited all the fires of jealous fury in his breast. He was ready to meet, to challenge, to destroy him.

"He shall die! I will pluck out his heart! He shall never get near enough to harm you. Where is he? Let me seek him. His doom is sealed—I swear it!"

Her bosom thrilled with triumph. This creature, so fierce, transformed to a demon who waited on her slightest will, would prove a formidable and deadly ally.

"No, Tyron, not that. You must not raise your hand to take his life. I have a plan. If you will follow it, you may easily rid me of the wretch, whose name is Coco Vargas."

"He shall feel the sting of the Spider—I swear it by the light of Heaven! What is your plan, Favia!—let me hear it."

Bending close, her voice sunk low as she unfolded the plot she had conceived—a scheme in blending with her nature—bold, hazardous, yet effective; and her listener, eager to obey her slightest command, applauded it.

"It shall be so. I will away at once," he said, starting away from the sofa.

"Then I am your promised bride. When you return I will be—" she left the sentence

purposely incomplete, but in her mind, added, "far from here, where you cannot find me, you Spider of ugliness!"

"You will be my wife," he finished for her. "Adieu, then, dear, glorious Favia!—I go to destroy Coco Vargas."

Kissing her hand a dozen times, he hurried from the mansion in the direction of Wirthmoor.

It was night before his interview with Favia ended, and the wind blew stiff and brisk in the starry darkness.

As he sped along a narrow pathway on the outskirts of the Wirthmoor tract—a path that led through a tangle of timber, brush and rank vines, known as *The Labyrinth*—he heard approaching footsteps.

Drawing into the shadows, he saw a form pass, a form that he watched until it was out of sight again in the gloom. Then, resuming his way, he mumbled:

"That is Hubert Ulster! He has been to our house to see Agnes. Why will he persist? Has not my father told him that she can never wed him—*never wed an Ulster*? Must we, eventually, kick him from our doors? Let him take care!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WEB OF THE SPIDER.

WE return to Alexandria, and also to Coco Vargas, who was still there, sweating in rage and excitement in his hunt after Favia Claremont.

Pursuing her from Atfeh to Alexandria, up and down, high and low, almost everywhere he searched, bold, cautious, assuming numerous disguises, persistent as a terrier after a rat, yet trailing a phantom, as it were, that seemed to elude his grasp as easily and swift as a quick-transient shadow.

"Slippery Sphinx!" he muttered; "wait till I lay hold of you. I shall grind you to atoms! I will wring your head off! A curse on your crooked path! You need not think to tire me—you shall feel my clench when you least expect. *Caramba!* You cannot escape my vengeance—the vengeance of Coco Vargas. I will soon pounce upon you and devour you!"

It was early morning of a day about three months subsequent to his arrival in Alexandria. He was in the vicinity of the departing English and French steamers, watching them, as usual of late, with the idea that his intended prey might seek to renew her flight, and thus fall into his clutches.

Dressed plainly, with a large Panama hat, he was standing with folded arms, watching the deck of one of the out-going steamers. A hand fell upon his shoulder. He sprang aside.

"*Caramba!*" and his eyes fell on a dwarfed, repulsive form. "Ho! who the devil are you?"

It was Tyron Wirth, the Spider. His pigmy figure was clothed in black; he wore a tall, cone-fashioned hat that appeared like a thick, blunted horn above his wolfish features, and over one arm he carried a colored shawl.

"My name is Ibrahim," said the dwarf, stoically.

"Oh, it is, eh—'Ibrahim?' And who do you take me for?"

"You are Coco Vargas—"

"*Caramba!* how do you know that?"

"Because I have seen you before, and because I have business with you now."

"You have business with me, eh? What is it? But do not be too sure that I am the man you seek."

The Spider had noted down a description of Vargas, which Favia had given him, and his shrewd, snaky eyes recognized the Spaniard, despite many alterations in the latter's person, made by the barber and clothier. Vargas then wore, for the first time, the slim goatee he was wont to twirl and twist in after years.

"I cannot be mistaken," went on the Spider, quietly. "Did you ever know a woman named Favia Claremont?"

"Favia Claremont?" shouted Vargas, as if he had been dealt a blow. "Yes—furies of thunder!—yes, I know, and I hate her! Devils on her head! Sphinx! Wildcat! *Caramba!* What do you know of Favia Claremont, you imp?"

"Did you ever see this?" asked the Spider, weaving his web carefully, and he drew from beneath the shawl a sandal—one of the sandals Favia had worn with her rich Oriental costume.

"Yes. It belongs to her. The sandal of the

Sphinx! Where did you get it? Does your business concern her?"

He spoke excitedly, stepped forward, and gripped his interlocutor by the shoulder.

"Favia Claremont escaped you in Cairo—"

"Yes, yes, after sticking me with a knife! Well?"

"I brought her from Atfeh—or my boat did, for I do not work any more. I have been a dragoman. She told me she was fleeing from a beast—"

"Ho! 'a beast!'"

"And I gave her refuge in my house. Two days ago she disappeared, and she left my only son a crazy man. He loved her, and she spit upon him. I hate Favia Claremont!"

During the speech of the dwarf, Vargas's eyes lighted ravenously.

"You hate Favia Claremont?" he cried. "Good. But where is she now? Do you know? Can you tell me?"

"She fled from Alexandria back to Cairo, two days since."

"To Cairo?" echoed the Spaniard, in amazement.

"She fears you, and she is cunning. While you follow a false trail to Europe, she will be doubling on you."

"I see. *Caramba!* Devil of a Sphinx! How clever."

"I, too, am tracking Favia Claremont," continued the pigmy, his eyes gleaming. "I have cause to be revenged upon her; she turned the brain of my only son. Together we may overtake her. Together we may wreak torture upon her."

The Spider's little orbs were aglitter and scintillating, as if in passion at the thought of his professed hatred for the Sphinx. But his brain was, in reality, whirling with a devilish joy; he already saw Coco Vargas in his subtle meshes, and was picturing his ultimate destruction.

"Agreed!" snarled Vargas, a ferocious expression on his countenance, and striking his breast. "Together we will trail the Sphinx!—this beautiful woman's face, with the heart, the claws, the bite of a lion. Let us go at once."

"At once," acquiesced the pseudo-dragoman. "We will 'at once' to Cairo. I have friends there who will cheerfully act as spies with us. In a short time we will glut our revenge."

"Our revenge?—yes," and Vargas shook both his fists at the sky. "This is grand. Lead on, Ibrahim! Our revenge!"

Tyron Wirth had all he could do to conceal his malignant satisfaction as he turned and led the way from the harbor. He had expected to meet with success in his plot to entrap and destroy the Spaniard—the plan instigated by Favia Claremont—but the ease, the quickness with which he had drawn the unwary Vargas into the web, afforded him additional and fiendish pleasure.

The two immediately engaged passage in the afternoon steamer for Cairo, then dined at the Hotel L'Orient—conversing more at length upon their proposed course; then made some preparations for their hurried departure.

In due time they were on the little steamer speeding on the back track to Cairo.

After a week of fruitless search the pretended Ibrahim informed him that he had learned, through his spies, that Favia Claremont had certainly been there.

"Ho! she has been here," exclaimed Vargas. "What then? Is she not here now?"

"No," replied Ibrahim, simulating angry disappointment; "she is with a touring party—friends whom she knew in England, and whose company she will keep till they return: so say my spies—"

"But where, Ibrahim?—where? Which way have they gone?"

"To the Wells of Elhamar."

"Devil take the Wells of Elhamar, and the touring party into the bargain! Up, then! We go to the Wells of Elhamar!"

The Spaniard could not bridle his impatience a single hour. Ibrahim engaged a boat to take them as far as Assouan. At this point the boat was to wait for them, while they reached the Wells by Burckhardt's route.

Notwithstanding Vargas had lived so many years on the borders of the half-barbarous country they were now entering, he found his companion to be superior in his knowledge of Arabic—which dispensed with a dragoman—and more thoroughly posted as to the necessities for such a trip. All went well, therefore.

When they reached Assouan they packed a tent and a few articles on a dromedary, and set out for the Wells.

"We are fortunate," said the diabolical Ibrahim, as they pursued their way slowly onward.

"Fortunate!" repeated Vargas, in a perspiration. "I do not see it. How? Most unfortunate. *Caramba!* if I cannot grasp and throttle Favia Claremont, after such a journey, I shall go raving mad!"

"No danger of our not finding her," continued the dwarf, in a luring tone. "I have counted the days and hours since we left Cairo, and I know that we will come upon the Wells at night. Our approach will not be observed."

And it was night on the day they arrived at the Wells.

But no signs of Favia!

"Furies of thunder!" howled the excited and disappointed Spaniard. "She is gone again!"

"She may have kept to the route, and continued on to El Mekheyref."

"*Caramba!*"

"You do not give up?" challenged Ibrahim, affecting dismay.

"Give up? No! To the end of the earth! But we have not provisions to last. We will be forced to return to Cairo."

"And there we can watch for her return—watch night and day, by turns."

"Bah!" shouted Vargas; "why did we not adopt that plan at the first—hey, you imp?" Ibrahim appeared crestfallen.

"True," he admitted, "we might as well have done that."

"I am mad enough to twist your neck!" gritted the Spaniard. "While we are fagged out and resting in this accursed place, she may return by another route, and be well off again. *Caramba!*" and the thought of his foolishness pricked like a burr in his tormented brain.

Being utterly exhausted by their forced tramping, they pitched their tent and partook of a frugal luncheon.

"And we have hardly food enough for two more meals," he growled, fiercely. "I don't kick you for making this mess of it, because I am as great a fool as you are a knave. May you be hung for this—you imp!"

"I am very sorry," was Ibrahim's humble rejoinder; but in those little gleaming eyes—as he averted his face in the pretense of striking at a crawling bug—there was a look so deadly, so full of strange, fearful meaning, that, had Vargas seen it, he would have conceived new and suspicious ideas of the character of his dwarf companion.

The Spaniard slumbered fitfully for awhile, when they retired for the night. But when his snoring told of hearty repose, the Spider rose with stealth and glided from the tent.

His movements were singular. Proceeding to a stump or post that faced the open plain, he pinned something to its surface, then touched it with fire. The thing sputtered for a moment and presently started round with hissing rapidity, showering sparks in a circle, and shedding a dull glare. A pinwheel!

Very soon—and before the pinwheel had sputtered itself out—three figures approached, like specters in the dim starlight, coming at a "double quick." They halted before the dwarf, who leveled a finger at the tent.

"He sleeps there. Secure him without delay, and—you know the rest."

"Where is our money, first?" demanded one of the brawny fellows, in a guttural voice.

Tyron Wirth cast two small bags of gold into his hands, which he caught eagerly, and suspended at his girdle.

"Come," said the dusky spokesman; and the three advanced to the tent, like crouching, crawling animals.

The dwarf waited, savagely impatient.

Pretty soon there was an outcry from the tent. The voice of Vargas rose in a bellow; there was a noise of confusion, struggle and heavy blows.

"*Hoi caramba!* what's this?" issued on the night in a roar of rage. "Back, there, you dogs! Take that!"—and here a pistol banged. "Ibrahim! Ibrahim! where are you? Help! Ha! my throat. Vipers! Assassins! you are strangling me!"

Then all was still.

In a few moments two of the strange trio came forth. Vargas was bound and gagged.

While one held the captive, the other ignited a torch and flared it fiercely in the Spaniard's face.

"Blood for blood!" he screeched—the law of the savage Bedouins—"you have killed our comrade. Blood for blood!"

Two things, discovered by the light of the flaming brand, sent a shiver of dread through the frame of the prisoner. He saw the impish dwarf fairly dancing with glee, and knew that he was a victim to treachery; he saw that his captors were renegade Ababdehs, whose leader—a cold blooded, cruel and merciless wretch—was dreaded by travelers and guides. He need expect little mercy from such a crew, after having shot and killed one of their number—the result of that pistol-shot in the tent.

If there was any doubt in the mind of Coco Vargas as to the true peril of his situation, this was waived when the dwarf stepped up to him and maliciously screamed:

"Fool! Ass! Poor dupe that you are! how blind you have been! You have followed a false trail—to your doom! Ha! ha! ha! Let me tell you that Favia Claremont was safe in county Sussex when I first met you. This is her plot to escape a despicable enemy. In Cairo, I sent for Achmet, the Ababdeh chief; and he is to kill you, Coco Vargas—to kill you! Our boat will wait a long time at Assouan. I have sent another boat to El Mekheyref; in it I will return to Cairo, thence to my dear, glorious Favia, who is to be my bride for ridding her of you. My bride, Coco Vargas!—is it not excellent? Now, away with him! To the Red Sea! Drown him! Strangle him! Scorch his body till he blisters to death! I am Tyron Wirth, the Spider of Wirthmoor—not Ibrahim, the dragoon! This is the sting of the Spider. I bite you because you hate the woman I love! Ha! ha! ha!" The dwarf clapped his hands with a demon's enthusiasm.

For a second after hearing the vaunted treachery, Coco writhed like a tortured giant—then sunk to the earth, tearing the gag from his mouth, and roaring like a wounded bull. But the spasm passed, leaving him overcome with weakness. He lay flat on his back, glaring like a lashed anaconda on the triumphant dwarf.

"Devil of perdition!" he hissed, with a choking, gasping breath, "my turn will come yet. Remember me! for I will escape this damnable trap, and hunt you, as well as Favia Claremont, to an everlasting death! Beware! I am not dead yet—you vile shape of Satan! Oh, if I could get you once by the throat!"

"Away with him, Achmet!" cried the Spider.

The lighting of the torch was a signal. Three more of the murderous gang appeared, bringing horses.

Vargas was strapped firmly to one of the steeds—while he blasphemed and uttered horrible threats—and the whole party galloped swiftly away.

"To the Red Sea! Ha! ha! ha!" rung the voice of the Spider after them.

Then the exultant betrayer mounted the dromedary they had brought ostensibly to carry their tent and provisions, but which was in reality for the purpose he now enlisted it—and on the back of the swift "ship of the desert" he sped toward El Mekheyref.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEED IN THE LABYRINTH.

HAVING thus disposed of Coco Vargas, and executed the condition necessary to gain the hand of Favia Claremont—for he was safe in believing that Achmet, the renegade Ababdeh, would perform his part of the bargain to the best of a fiend's ability—Tyron Wirth made all haste to return to England, eager for the consummation of his marriage with the woman he adored.

The time unavoidably occupied in the task just completed was longer than he anticipated. The murmurs of bursting springtime filled the air, when the Spider of Wirthmoor disembarked at Rye and took a chaise for the "Angle of Sussex."

His heart beat high. He was thrilled with hope—this ugly little shape; he congratulated himself upon the prospect of his early wedding with the loveliest woman in eastern England.

At Claremontwilde he dismissed the chaise—it was but a step over to his own home. He had come to surprise his beautiful betrothed. It was in the night, the hour late, and the full round moon pouring on a scene of weird silence.

The mansion was dark and spectral. A low wind sighed mournfully in the trees around

it. The Spider paused and gazed on the grim edifice.

"My coming is unexpected!" he exclaimed, gayly. "No one has seen me who knows me. She will be overjoyed to know that I have so faithfully carried out her wishes. Happy, happy Tyron Wirth!"

Then he ascended the broad steps and hammered loudly on the brazen clapper.

A light moved in the entry, a slow step answered his summons. When the door opened, the face of a stranger appeared. But the stranger—whoever he was—evinced neither surprise nor fear at being confronted by so ghoul-like a visitor, and in the solemn dead of night.

A scrutinizing glance, then he ejaculated:

"So you've come. I was looking for you. You are the Spider of Wirthmoor—no mistaking that, I trow. Enter."

"Yes, yes, it is I!"—striding into the hall. "I am back with good news. Where is my Favia Claremont?"

"You'll not find her here, nor will you find her at all, unless you can catch a mole blindfold," was the gruff reply of the man, setting down the lamp, and fumbling in his pockets, as if in search of something.

"Hey! What do you mean by that?" demanded the Spider.

"I mean that Favia Claremont has gone away—"

"Gone?"

"The estate changed hands some weeks ago, sir. There's nobody here besides myself, now—Ah! I have it; Favia Claremont left this letter for you." He produced a tightly sealed missive and handed it to Tyron Wirth.

In an instant it was torn open, and by the light of the flickering lamp—which the man held high for him—he hurriedly perused its contents. Then a cry, a wail, prolonged, painful, and which nearly curdled the blood of the man; he tore the note into fragments and rushed out through the night.

And this was the message which Favia left for her tool and dupe, the Spider:

"TYRON WIRTH: If, when you return to receive this, you have rid me of my enemy, Coco Vargas, accept the thanks, the eternal gratitude of the haunted woman you have benefited."

"Your expected reward—my hand in marriage—you must forego. Nor do I act a lie in fleeing from you; for, you recollect, I simply agreed to become your 'promised' bride. It must assuredly be plain to you, that I could never wed with one so lacking that fair manhood which a woman may admire."

"While I seem ungrateful in having deceived you to further my own ends, I deeply sympathize with you; and that you may eventually find some solace for your delusive adoration of me, is the wish of
"FAVIA CLAREMONT."

A letter couched in terms that plainly betrayed her motives in using him, her dislike of his ugliness, yet evincing a desire—a woman's inherent impulse—to avoid wounding him as far as possible.

But the message was gall, fire, wormwood to him. It struck like a sword in his breast, like a thunderbolt on his brain. Dizzied, agonized, overwhelmed by the falsity of the woman he had served—a woman he had come to regard dearer than his own life; to be so coolly deserted, when he had, perhaps, stained his hands with the sacrifice of a human life, to please her—it was too much. He rushed forth, blindly staggering down the carriageway, along the road, to the path that led through the Labyrinth of Wirthmoor.

"Oh, Favia! Favia!" he wailed and groaned, "was it for this I worshiped you and held you higher than the angels of Heaven! Was it for this I steeped my soul in crime?—sent Coco Vargas to a grave in the Red Sea, when he never did me harm? Ungrateful, heartless deceiver!"—and here his mood altered to a frigid struggle with his emotions. "Henceforth, I hate all womankind; their eyes that beam, their smiles that lure, their lips that lie—their lives, their ways, their poisonous charms, and all that is in them! I shall not go mad—no, no. Would that I could. Its blackness would be welcome. Unhappy, miserable Spider!" He wrung his hands, and breathed as if suffocating, so terrible was the bitter strain.

Suddenly he paused. Startled and rigid he stood in the center of the goblin path. A curdling sound had broken upon the lonely recesses of the Labyrinth.

A man's voice. Loud and appealing it rung—then a cry as of mortal agony.

"Help! Help!—oh, villain! you have stabbed me to death!" cut into the ears of the listening dwarf.

The next instant he sprung forward like a

racings hound, for the shriek was that of a man being murdered.

At the same moment when Tyron Wirth sounded the clapper on the door at Claremont-wilde, a lovers' tableau was in progress at Wirthmoor.

Two figures stood on the borders of the Labyrinth, alone in the moonlight—Grafton Ulster and Agnes, the sister of the Spider.

They had long loved each other, but the stern edict of the parent, Roderick Wirth, forbade her marriage with any one bearing the name of Ulster.

Roderick Wirth cherished an old feud against the line of Ulster, and though their relations as neighbors were tolerably courteous, the enmity was by no means appeased. Moreover, and independent of this abyss between the lovers and the altar, Grafton Ulster's dark, treacherous face and serpent manners were not calculated to further him in the esteem of the family he sought to enter.

How Agnes could voluntarily bestow her pure affections upon a man whose nature seemed as forbidding as his, the grave and troubled father was unable to conceive. But it was so; like the coiling of the ivy round the young, budding oak, encompassing it to destroy it, Grafton Ulster won her heart mysteriously and triumphant.

"Agnes," said the unfavored suitor, as he held her unresisting form, "this state of affairs is unendurable. Surely you do not doubt that I will be all to you I have promised?"

No, Grafton—no, I do not."

"Then why hesitate? We may enjoy our love, if you consent, and not be trammelled by the forbidding of a parent as unkind as he is senseless—

"Hush! He is my father," she interrupted. "Let me go, now, Grafton; I must return to the house."

Evidently their stolen interview was just then drawing to a close.

"Stay—a moment, Agnes."

The fair girl lingered by his side. He gazed hard, almost fiercely, into her soulful face.

"What if your father should die, Agnes?"

"Grafton, what do you mean?" starting at the singular tone of the question.

"I mean, love, that if death should take your father from you, would you marry me then? Would you feel yourself free to act?"

Agnes shuddered.

"It is too terrible to think of."

"Answer me, Agnes."

"Oh, Grafton, I do love my father, and I love you too!" she exclaimed, warmly. "While he lives, I must not disobey him. He is entirely alone, and so lonely. He has only Tyron and me to cheer him in his old age; and Tyron has gone, no one knows where, maybe never to come back. I would be heartless indeed to desert him—I cannot leave him, as long as he lives."

"Enough, Agnes. Adieu," he said, abrupt and cold.

He kissed the burning lips of the girl, and released her.

As she glided in haste across the dry, yellow grass, he plunged into the path through the Labyrinth.

Tyron Wirth bounded ahead in answer to that wild scream and cry for help.

He reached a bend in the path—where the dome of interlaced tree boughs was broken, and the stray beams of the moon found their way through to shed a pale glimmer in the heart of the shadowed place—and here a ghastly vision greeted him.

Prone on his back lay Roderick Wirth, his aged locks and whitened features crimsoned and clotted with blood. At his side knelt a figure in the act of drawing a knife from its frightful sheath in his neck.

Hearing the noise in the leaves, of running, approaching footsteps, the figure turned: a pale, scared face—the face of Hubert Ulster.

For a second, Tyron Wirth was transfixed with horror, in the next came a thrill, a throe, rousing him to the fury of a tiger.

"Ulster! Assassin!—God forgive you! you have killed me!" huskily gasped the dying man.

And ere the words had left the livid lips, and while Hubert Ulster still knelt with head half turned, and hand on the knife-hilt, looking to see who it was that had surprised him, a form shot forward, like a bolt, from the shadows—a pair of hands like the claws of an eagle seized

him by the throat, a voice as harsh as a jaguar's growl knelled in his ears:

"Devil! Murderer! Wretch! you have killed my father!"

"No! I swear by Heaven I did not," blurted Ulster, as he rolled to the ground in the embrace of his savage adversary.

The Spider heard him not. Vengeance, vengeance was all that controlled him then—quick, unsparing revenge upon the man, who, caught in a situation of damning evidence of guilt, was already convicted of the murder.

Over and over, around and about, crashing in the brittle bushes and thumping against the trees. Here and there, across and across the path—and the rays of the moon through the naked treetops lighted up a scene of struggle beside the corpse of Roderick Wirth that was fiercer than the clinch of madmen.

But the dwarf—though he was supple, wiry, steel-muscled, and incited by the bloody deed—was overmatched. His antagonist bent him down to the earth; then grasping a stick—a piece of timber that he would hardly have been able to wield had he not been insane with passion and the emergency of his danger—he brought it down upon the skull of the dwarf with a thud that echoed in the Labyrinth.

One despairing moan, and Tyron Wirth lay conquered and lifeless.

Hubert Ulster paused not to repeat the blow. Released from the mad gripe of the avenging son, he fled along the murky path.

Hardly had he disappeared when another emerged upon the fearful spot of tragedy.

Agnes, hearing the cry and the struggle before she had made half the distance toward the roadway leading to the house, had turned and run in the direction of the sound. More acute than her brother, she had recognized her father's voice.

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried, breathlessly, and tottering weakly toward the corpse; "father! father! He is dead!" and with a scream that pierced far into the night—that pierced the ears of Hubert Ulster, as he fled, and made him leap as if a host of accusing angels were behind him—she sunk down as cold and rigid as death itself.

"Agnes! Sister! Help!—I faint! Water!" called a low voice.

It roused her. She sprang up and looked quickly about.

"It was Tyron!" Then: "Tyron! Tyron! you called me. Where are you?"

"Here, sister—here. I—I am weak. Bring me water. I choke! Hasten! Go for assistance. I fear I am dying!"

She stood a moment with eyes staring and bent on the crawling figure of the Spider, who was dragging himself forward by inches, and whose hideous face, besmeared with the blood from his gashed and lacerated brow, horrified her.

"Brother! Oh, God! what means all this?" Her veins were clogged with ice.

"Murder! Hubert Ulster! He has nearly killed both of us. Go! get help from the house. My throat is parched."

Although terrified till she could scarce move, his imperative order nerved her, and Agnes Ulster ran as she had never run before.

The dwarf managed to drag himself up to the corpse. He placed one hand on the breast of his father, holding his breath, and his glittering eyes burning intensely as he looked down on the upturned face—the moment was a crisis.

"Dead! dead! dead!" he wailed; and his wolfish head of matted hair bowed low, and hot tears streamed down his blood-bathed cheeks. "The only man who ever loved the hated Spider of Wirthmoor—dead! dead! Oh, my father!"

A sob that seemed to burst his heart broke from his quivering lips; but he raised his head again, and hissed—through tears and blood, and with a fierceness that was like the hiss of water on heated iron:

"God in Heaven! let me live! Let me live for vengeance on the murderer of my father!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DOUBLE TRAIL.

GLOOMY was the grief that settled upon Wirthmoor.

The old and affectionate servants lamented the loss of an indulgent master, and the house was festooned in mourning.

The murder was largely canvassed; it flew to the north and west, and caused a shudder among the people. Famous detectives came

down from London to work up the case; the authorities offered heavy rewards for information that would bring to justice the heartless assassin of this aged and feeble gentleman, who ever lived like a pure Christian, a valuable subject, and whose hospitalities were manifold.

But there was no clew. Only one being in the world could tell the mystery of the deed; and he was madly delirious, tied to his bed, constantly guarded by faithful nurses, while three eminent physicians remained untiringly at his side.

The horrible wound inflicted by the timber on the skull of Tyron Wirth, was not a death-stroke. By a miracle, he lived—after a painful and dangerous operation—though the ordeal left him helpless, robbed of memory and reason, a fevered, raving thing that had to be bonded to restrain the excess of his insane paroxysms.

And while the Spider lay thus—not knowing the hand that fed him, nor the voice of his sister who tried to soothe him, nor the encouragement of the physicians who ministered to him, other events progressed at Wirthmoor and in its vicinity.

Grafton Ulster, darkly grave, called upon Agnes and tendered his condolence.

"I sympathize with you deeply, darling, in this hour of affliction," he said, softly, when she came down to receive him. "How sudden, how terrible—Why, you won't kiss me, Agnes!"

Leading her to a sofa, he would have embraced her. But she pushed him gently back.

"You are very kind, Grafton; but—don't touch me."

"What means this cold reception, Agnes? I ought to be welcome in such an hour."

"You are, dear Grafton—so you are. I am glad you have come. But, let it be only because of my father's death, please. Do not speak, or remind me in any way, of our love, I—"

"Agnes!"

"I cannot think of ourselves now, Grafton. More: I—I must tell you something."

"Well?" he inquired, as she paused.

Her eyes, though red with weeping, were dry now, and there was a look of forced sternness in them.

"We must bury our love, dear Grafton—from to-day we must forget each other as wholly as if we had always been strangers."

"Agnes! What are you thinking about?" he exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Oh! it is hard, very hard; but I have a duty to perform, a duty far more absorbing than our poor affection—a duty to the dead!"

"You chill me!" half-interrupted the dark lover. "I confess I don't understand at all. What can take precedence to our troth?—what make you forget your vows to me? Agnes—girl—do not talk this way."

"Dear Grafton, listen: my father has been murdered. I can think of nothing, cherish no hope or happiness, until I have hunted down the foul assassin who drove the knife!"

"This is foolish. The detectives will attend to that."

"The detectives do not know!" quickly, and with a burning glance. "There is only one person in the world who can find the man that killed my father; he will never tell the detectives. The vengeance is his own—and mine! He now lies, chained to his bed in madness, hovering between life and eternity. But he will recover—the doctors say so; then we will track the murderer!"

Ulster involuntarily shuddered at the girl's vehemence. He had never seen her so stern. There was a peculiar ring, a determined accent to her voice, which plainly showed him that Agnes Wirth was something more than the pliant child he had supposed her to be.

And as she announced her resolution to set aside everything while accomplishing her object of revenge, she arose and went to the window, to hide the actual depth of the strong emotions which governed her.

He contemplated her as she stood with her back toward him—a look that was scowling and sharp with rising anger. But his voice did not lose its persuasiveness as he said:

"I had hoped, Agnes, that with the death of your father, my love would comfort you. I would take you to my bosom, and fill your life with so many sweets, that you would almost forget you had ever known a bereavement—"

"Impossible!"

And with that single word angering him,

destroying whatever prospect of advantage he had drawn upon the occasion, he managed to depart calmly, speaking a soft adieu—and cursed her obstinacy when away from her presence.

"So, she'll not marry till she hunts down the murderer of Roderick Wirth?" he hissed, as he strode in the direction of Ulster Manor. "Then she may go to perdition! It'll be a long time, I guess, before she attains her object—and I might as well say good-by to her baby face. The murderer is to be caught and killed by the brother and sister, eh?" with a low, sepulchral laugh.

Another day brought the discovery that Hubert Ulster had fled precipitately from County Sussex, from England, with his negro valet, Azrak, and the course of their going was covered.

To a few, this sudden disappearance appeared suspicious. But what could Hubert Ulster have to do with the assassination of Roderick Wirth? There was not known to exist any open enmity between the men; to the contrary—although Hubert had been first rejected as a suitor by the father, and afterward by Agnes herself—he was always pleasantly, if not cordially, received at Wirthmoor, and had not avowed any harsh feeling toward Roderick Wirth for holding him in poor esteem. Thus it was only food for mere gossip, and the hasty departure did not enlist particular attention.

At the end of two weeks, Tyron Wirth was beyond the crisis of his fever. The delirium subsided and Agnes redoubled her arduous attentions to the improving patient. Soon he was out of bed, and able to move about the apartment, when he related to her all that had transpired in the Labyrinth.

And then, in the lonely solitude of the sick chamber, there was a strange, solemn scene. Brother and sister knelt. The Spider drew his sister close to his breast, and they uttered a vow—a vow to destroy Hubert Ulster, and to devote the whole lease of their lives to the one great object of revenge.

To London.

Six months later.

A cab was rolling at great speed toward the Bristol depot to catch the train.

As it passed a certain block, its occupant suddenly raised the glass and called out to the man on the box.

"Ho, there! Driver! Halt! stop!"—and when the cab came to a standstill: "Do you see that man yonder?—walking fast ahead of us. Catch him. Quick. His name is Vargas. Address him by it. Bid him come here. Off with you!"

It was *Coco Vargas*!

The driver leaped from the box to obey, and the occupant of the cab watched him eagerly.

Vargas was striding at a goodly pace. He had not noticed the cab, nor heard what passed.

"Hello-a! Hello-a! Mr. Vargas, I say will 'e stoop there—stoop a bit!" called a voice.

Vargas paused and wheeled.

"There's a mon back 'ere as 'd see ye, Mr. Vargas, I say. Will 'e coom 'ere a minit?"

"Heh!" snarled the Spaniard, "who are you?"

"I'm the driver o' number 9—a gude coach, sur. There's a mon 't wants ye back there," and he jerked a thumb toward the stationary vehicle.

"Oh, there is, eh? Another trap. Look out, you rascal!" and he frowned: "no tricks. I am the devil to trifle with. *Caramba!* I am ready for anything. Where is the party who wants *Coco Vargas*?" and the driver saw him cock a pistol under his cape as he started toward the cab.

"Hello-a! Wot's this 'ere mean, I wonder? There's a trouble 'ere, an' 't 'll hurt the name o' number 9. I say, mon, *what 'r' 'e goin' to do—*"

But Vargas was at the cab door.

Instantly there was a cry, an oath, the pistol cracked, and the Spaniard, venting a howl, threw himself inside.

"Ho! Furies of thunder! It is the devil—Ibrahim!" he bellowed, and as he bellowed he gripped the Spider in a deadly hug, for the bullet had missed its aim.

"Hold! Hold!" cried the dwarf, as he fell undermost on the cushions.

"Accursed imp! I told you I would live to kill you!" shouted Vargas, clinching his fingers in the throat of the struggling, squirming form.

"You sent me to the Red Sea, where they tied

iron to my heels and put a bag over my head. I was to be drowned like a kitten, hey?"—giving the throat a tighter squeeze—"but I got loose. *Caramba!* I freed my arms and stabbed your bounds while they slept. I am here. I am *Coco Vargas*, alive, mad for vengeance! See: I am strangling you. Ho! you imp of Satan!"

"Loose my throat, and listen to me, *Coco Vargas!*" gurgled the strangling Spider, whose ugly face was purpled to hideousness, and whose eyes and tongue were protruding.

The driver, scared nigh out of his wits, and not interfering through a cowardly fear of his own life, banged the cab door shut, clambered to his box, and whipped up the horses. He drove wildly, goaded the animals at a fearful rate; his hair stood on end as he made for the nearest police station.

To his utter amazement, when he reached the station and sprung down—with the intention of running into the office and giving a loud alarm—the cab window flew open and both men cried at once:

"Drive on there, you dog! What are you stopping for? To the Bristol depot. If we miss the train, you will get a broken head!"

The driver's astonishment increased when he saw the two plunge, arm-in-arm, into the bustling, hurrying crowd at the depot. He was at a loss to imagine what could have changed these implacable foes—for he had reasonable evidence that they were foes—to apparent good friends who seemed suddenly to have business in the same direction.

"A bloody rum pair *they* be!" he mumbled, as he turned away.

Nor may any one ever know all that passed between the dwarf and the Spaniard. Suffice it, that they became close associates; they joined Agnes Ulster at Bristol, and the three departed from the shores of England in the first packet.

And now we resume our thread in the city of St. Louis, at a date eleven years subsequent to the transaction between Elzontis, the Jew, and Vargas, the Spaniard, in Cairo, which connects the chain of after-events with the drama and situations of our earlier chapters. Back to the Mound City at a time about ten years after the murder in the *Labyrinth* of Wirthmoor.

CHAPTER XIX.

SPHINX AND TRAILER.

WE follow *Coco Vargas*, who, the reader remembers, was assaulted, knocked insensible and kidnapped, immediately upon leaving the house of Françoise Ellory, placed in a cab, with his enemy, the Sphinx, and borne rapidly southward.

The two men, Nelson and Grego, sat like grim statues, with the captured and unconscious Spaniard between them. Favia Claremonte, on the opposite seat, was smiling whitely.

To a residence on Beaumont street—and here the captive was conveyed to a room in the third story of the house: a bare, chilly, apartment, to which she led the way, and where she flared the lamp ahead excitedly.

"Haste!" she ordered. "Strap him down."

The men were types of roughness: one, a coarse-dressed river-man; the other, a dark-skinned, vicious-featured, shabby fellow, whose eyes and hair and cheek-bones told of Indian blood. Two apt villains for the task accomplished, which Favia had secured, without much trouble, to serve her purpose.

Near the center of the floor were two stout iron rings, about a man's length apart, and firmly driven into the joists beneath the planking. To these *Coco Vargas* was made fast, by his wrists and heels, lying prone upon his back.

At a sign from Favia, when this was done, the two villains withdrew.

The bullet from the pistol fired by Vargas, in the gambling saloon, on the previous night, had not left her unmarked, although its wound was not dangerous. A thick bandage round her brow bespoke a scarring furrow beneath. But the mar of the bandage hardly hid her marvelous beauty; only the grinding of her fine white teeth, and the angry gleam of her eyes—telling of strong and terrible passion—ill contrasted with the natural loveliness of her face.

Favia Claremont then—ten years after her flight from the Angle of Sussex, England—was a vastly different woman. Time, contact with the vices and enmities of the world, be-

sides a nightmare that would haunt her as she struggled here and there, and the imprint of early trials, had shorn the dove of its down and tenderness—creating a character of intrepid mold.

When alone with her prisoner, the man she despised and feared—and who, till within the month past, she had thought was dead—she strode to and fro, muttering in her triumph and in the plan of some furious action.

For a long time Vargas remained motionless in his bonds. The blow he had received from the billy was no gentle one. Perhaps Favia Claremont began to fear that he was killed outright—which, to suit other intentions, she had not wished to occur—for she suddenly advanced to him, and gazed hard into the pale, prostrate face.

But the Spaniard opened his eyes at last. Recovering slowly, he looked up at the woman bending over him. Bewilderment, then consternation, were traced in his countenance; and when he essayed to move in vain—and a harsh, malicious laugh broke from the lips of the Sphinx, as she marked his futile straining—he blurted:

"Furies of thunder! I am tied down!"

"Hal hal hal so you are, *Coco Vargas*, tied, and strapped, and helpless. And, worse yet, you are in the power of Favia Claremont! What think you, *now*, of trailing the Sphinx?" and again her grating, hollow laugh sounded in the barren room.

Vargas writhed like a hooked serpent.

"Curse these straps!" he roared, in a rage.

"Sphinx! wildcat! let me up!"

"Oh, you may squirm, *Coco Vargas*," she taunted. "You'll find those ropes and rings far stronger than your muscle. I drove them there, only to-day. They were purposely to hold you. Twist, wriggle, strain, you wretch! it is of no avail. You are at my mercy!"

Caramba! bellowed the Spaniard, who was struggling like a madman, and glaring like a pinioned devil up into the face of the triumphant Sphinx.

And as he tugged and jerked, something fell from his pocket. Favia snatched it up.

"Ho! give me that!" shouted Vargas, in a spasm of frantic fury. "Drop it! *Caramba!* don't look at it. Accursed witch! let me loose, I say!"

She paid no attention to his ravings.

"Oh, if I could but gripe you!" he ground through his chattering lips.

Favia had unfolded and was reading the paper which the ex-ship-captain had given to the Spaniard, when the two met at the liquor-shop on Plum street.

"So, *Coco Vargas*, I have made a discovery."

"Furies eat you!" howled Vargas, tigerishly.

"I read further," pursued the Sphinx; "and I see you have become a low robber."

Caramba!

"You have run short of money, eh? you must do a little thievery!" continuing her rapid perusal of the manuscript.

He gritted an oath.

Presently Favia refolded the document and placed it in her pocket. A thought seemed to strike her.

"*Coco Vargas*, I am going to give you a chance for your life."

"Oh, 'a chance for my life'! You are noble—devil of a Sphinx!" with an ironical grin.

"Yes," quick and stern, "for I brought you here to murder you!"

"Ho! you did? And you begin by pinning me down like a bug on a board. I enjoy it! Now you will bleed me to death, eh? Hal hal! Be about it. How merry!" but his cheeks blanched as he spoke bravely.

"Have I not good cause, *Coco Vargas*? Is there any reason why I should not strike out the life of a man as base as you are?—who swore to destroy me? who, it seems, has tracked me for more than ten years, to stab or shoot me? I have every incentive to kill you where you lie, without a moment for prayer, without heeding your screams for mercy!" and here she stepped closer to his side, with panting breath, a glance of direst fury, hands working, arms spread, and poise of body like a hovering hawk.

"Favia Claremont, once, was not the woman you see her now. You made her what she is—you! Hunted by you, she was driven to the recourse of setting a man to kill you. To escape this tool, whom she had promised to marry, she was forced to flee from her home, from her inheritance, out into the world, with

scarcely anything to support her but her wits—and these not hardened, ulcerated and born without shame. But I had tasted of crime. I had learned deceit, hatred, what it was to talk of murder; in my poverty, I grew avaricious, daring, callous-souled. I became a *roue*. I gambled, bet on races, prize-fights; I cheated, lied, took base advantages, black mailed, libeled, was a decoy for unprincipled wretches—anything to get money. What a change! Oh, Heaven! when I think of the past, when I was pure and good, and my mother taught me how to pray, and the world looked so bright, my heart bursts! it bursts with agony. Mark how I have strayed; fallen: sunk; step by step! May not people justly despise me? Was I thus in earlier years? Tell me, Coco Vargas? When I escaped from the Arabs of the Desert, when I met you in Cairo, when I implored your mercy and aid, and tried to move you with the tale of my trials, why were you not a man then, instead of so foul a brute? Might not my life have been happy from that time forth? Monster! You made me what I am, I say. In every sting my conscience endures, my soul cries for vengeance on you! Blazed in my brain, is one eternal thought, and that is vengeance on you! I hate you for every wrong I have committed; for every blight that stained the purity of my life, I could stab you again and again! Oh, Coco Vargas!" and her voice was sharp, shrill-toned, till it pierced his ears like knives, and burned his brain to a terror, "I seek revenge!—revenge because I am a wreck, and you made me so. I brought you here to kill you, to let you feel how I hate you! No relenting, no mercy; torture, anguish, death! Vile Spaniard, dog, would-be murderer, dread dread my vengeance!"

Poor, unfortunate Favia Claremont! Her life was, indeed, changed; her lot a wretched one.

"But I say I will give you a chance for your life," continued the Sphinx, who in a moment recovered from the outburst of her passion. "One chance only. If it does not warn you to beware, then you die. Farewell for a time. Remember, you can not escape!"

The eyes of the Spaniard wore a glossy glare. Rage and terror set a seal of ice on his compressed lips.

A second she paused to look at him—a meeting of the eyes of foes whose hatred seethed as unrelaxing as eternal fires; then she left him, locking the door after her.

With the closing of the door, the cold spell that had seized him was broken.

"Ho! *Caramba!* I shall be killed! You Sphinx! murderess! Let me out of this! Help! help! or I shall beat my own brains out! I am going mad! Help!"

And while the dismayed Vargas roared and shouted, he bumped the back of his head on the floor till his teeth rattled, strained till his blood-vessels seemed ready to rupture. But suddenly he desisted. He heard a sound like the raising of a window-sash; then there was a strange voice, that called lowly:

"Coco Vargas?"

"Hey?" exclaimed the Spaniard, striving to glance round toward the window, but prevented by his bonds. "Who is that? *Caramba!* where are you?"

A noise like a leap from the window-sill, followed by a light step; then a man stood over him.

"Ho! The devil! It is the model-maker!" he cried, in astonishment, as he recognized Gilbert Montrose, whom he had not seen since he resided in Cairo, near eleven years before.

"Hush!" said Montrose, frowning. "I have come to liberate you."

"Excellent!" and Vargas brightened wonderfully. "Clip off these bonds, then, sir model-maker; you are an admirable fellow!"

"It was fortunate that I saw the cab and the parties that captured you on Elliott avenue. I was just about to enter the house of Francoise Ellory, whom I love—"

"Whom you love?" echoed Vargas, amazed. "Ho! I love her myself. Furies of thunder! Francoise Ellory is not for you!" and he rolled his eyes as he stared upward at the model-maker.

Montrose smiled, grimly.

"Coco Vargas, your life is in danger. I am the only person who can save you. Upon two conditions I will set you free."

"Conditions! What are the conditions?"

"First, you must swear never to aspire to the hand of my Francoise—"

"Your Francoise! *Caramba!*"

"Second, you must swear that, forever in the future, you will shun Favia Claremont, and utterly set aside your vow to destroy her."

"*Caramba!*" sputtered the helpless Vargas, again. "How can I do that? Sphinx! Sorceress! I hate her!"

"I once loved Favia Claremont, and I judged her wrongly, which I have regretted. I saw enough of her, though, while looking in through that window, to make me care nothing for her now. Still I would be humane, and shield her from your merciless enmity."

"If you loved her once, love her again. Marry her. Clear out with her. I will not trouble her. So, help me out of this fix at once."

"You have heard my proposition," said Gilbert Montrose, folding his arms and calmly surveying the Spaniard. "Swear that you will give up all hopes of marrying Francoise Ellory, and leave St. Louis within a week; swear, too, that you will no longer pursue Favia Claremont. It is life or death to you. Choose."

"Francoise! my adored Francoise!" groaned Vargas. "But, no matter"—and his voice sharpened—"get me clear of this and I promise what you ask."

"Swear it!" insisted Montrose; and as he spoke he knelt down and placed a cross-hilted dagger to the lips of Coco Vargas. "Swear by the Virgin, by your hopes of salvation, by Heaven and earth, your heart, your body, your soul, your sight, and by the sign of this holy cross! Swear!"

"I swear it by all!" growled Vargas, who repeated after him the conditions of his freedom.

The next instant the dagger, the cross he had kissed and sworn by, sundered the cords and straps that bound him, and he sprung to his feet with an oath.

In a twinkling they clambered from the window to the shedding of the bath-house, thence to a stout grape-rack—soon they were upon the street.

The Spaniard paused not to thank his deliverer, nor did he hear the reminder which Gilbert Montrose hallooed after him.

"Remember your oath! or beware my vengeance, Coco Vargas!" called Montrose; and he hurried away in the gloom.

Vargas was heading for the den of Jean Banquo.

He had not gone far before he met a man—not that there was anything remarkable in the mere fact—but this man stepped directly in front of him, and tapped him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Hello, fellow! who the dogs are you?" he growled, surly and snappish.

"I'm Davie, and you're Coco Vargas. Know me? Well, I've been scouring round ever since dark, hunting for you. This here's a most lucky find, by crackey!"

"Oh, you are Davie? You are 'one of us'?" and Vargas became familiar also. "You've been searching for me—for what, now?"

"Well, we've had a sort of accident. Guess you an' me'll have to fix that ere bank business by ourselves."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Captain Baxter was run over by a heavy wagon, just about dark, on Plum street. Guess he must 'a' been drunk, somehow. But that ain't just exactly it. You see he's hurt mighty bad, an', thinkin' he's goin' to die, he's rollin' on the bed and talkin' about ministers an' such."

"Ministers! *Caramba!*"

"He sort of acts like he wants to make a confession—"

"A confession! *Santissima!* he will ruin us!"

The ruffian nodded.

"And where is he? What have you done with him?"

"Locked him into his room—and here's the key."

"Good! Let us get to him," and, to himself, as the ruffian nodded again and led the way: "A confession! *Caramba!* not if I can help it—the dog! Ho! a fine mess he'd make of it. I'll stop his mouth."

He strode after the man, in the direction of the house where their crippled pal was confined. But the forthcoming confession of this Captain Baxter was vastly different from what the two men anticipated—they reasonably supposing that he meant to divulge his alliance with them in the plot against the Merchants' Bank.

Retiring to another apartment after leaving her captive enemy, Favia Claremont found her two tools awaiting her.

"It is well done," she said. "Now then, one more task before I pay you."

She seated herself at a small desk, and wrote briefly. Sealing the note and addressing it, she handed it, together with the document she had taken from Vargas, to Nelson, the "long-shoreman."

"Take this, instantly, to the chief of police, or to any other of the authorities. When you return, I will have your pay ready for you. Go—and hasten."

And when she was alone:

"This chance I will give Coco Vargas for his life. If, when he has served in jail, and has learned that the Sphinx can deal with him—if, then, he persists in bounding on my track, I will shoot him down at first sight! He shall not live in my very company, as he has been doing at the gambling saloon for a whole month. Fool that I was to imagine he could not penetrate my mask! But he is in my power now. And so, Coco Vargas, the Sphinx has turned upon you at last; you have trailed her to your own destruction, instead of hers!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE POISONED LAMPS.

As Hubert Ulster delivered the shot that brought down his enemy, the Spider—at the conclusion of our ninth chapter—and as he bent over the prostrate body of the dwarf, ready to strike hard and savage with the pistol butt, while he seemed to forget, for the moment, that Francoise was near him—Azrak bounded forward, tore aside one pair of the heavy curtains opposite the entrance, and stepped into the chamber that was the bedroom of Coco Vargas.

The African had detected the existence of this second apartment, and fearing that Jean Banquo might have an ally secreted there, who would, in turn, shoot them down or attack them unawares, he hastened to make sure to the contrary.

Hardly had he disappeared beyond the curtains, which closed immediately behind him—and Ulster was still bending over and glowering upon the dwarf, watching for the slightest sign of life, that he might complete his work of annihilation—when there issued a cry from the second chamber, a gurgling, choking shout for assistance.

"Master Hubert! aid me quickly! I am strangling! *He's p!*"

The banker sprang to answer the loud call. And as he, too, vanished beyond the curtains, the figure of Girasa glided swiftly into the den, up to the limp form of the gnome.

Laying hold of the inanimate body by the shoulders, she dragged it out to the corridor, calling in a whisper, at the same time, to Francoise:

"Fly! Lose no time! If you remain here you will die with those two wretches! Fly!"

Francoise needed no second warning. She hastened after the negress.

Dropping the body of Jean Banquo on the stone flooring, Girasa ran back into the vaulted chamber and to the pair of huge lamps that burned in brackets behind the divan. Taking a handful of whitish powder from her pocket—a something resembling pulverized gum-camphor—she sprinkled it in the glass chimneys, onto the flames of the wicks.

Having executed this significant movement—the work of only a few seconds—she retreated hurriedly, closing the door, and circling a heavy bar into its socket on the outside, which effectually imprisoned those within.

When Azrak entered the adjoining chamber he tripped over a timber or strip directly in his way, and as he tripped, his head slipped into a noose that was suspended from the center of the arch above. Before he could recover himself, the noose tightened spitefully on his throat, and he spun round several times, wriggling, grasping frantically about, and uttering the painful, half-articulate shout which brought Ulster to his aid.

"A sly trap!" sputtered the mulatto, when, after much trouble, he was freed and on his feet again. "How lucky that I was not alone! Who would have thought of such a catch as that? I nearly hanged myself! How is Jean Banquo?"

"Dead!—Heaven be praised!" Ulster breathed with relief. "I need never fear him now. Come, let us go. We will leave his carcass to rot. When it is found—if it is found at all—"

they will think he sacrificed his own life while hatching some accursed mummery. Hal I remember; Francoise is here, too. Come, Azrak."

Returning to the outer chamber, they paused short in astonishment.

"Hal! The dwarf! Where is he!"

Azrak did not reply. He leaped to the door, gave the knob a wrench and a pull, then turned upon his master in dismay.

"Is it fastened?" demanded the banker, with a wavering voice; for a consciousness of danger seized his mind.

"Yes—locked!" cried Azrak, excited unusually. "We forgot his attendant, the disguised negress. She has been here, and rescued the body, and made us prisoners. There is no help for us. We may starve to death here. Nobody can penetrate to the den of Jean Banquo besides ourselves!"

"No! 'Death! we must get out!' hissed the frightened man, and he grasped and rattled the knob with a furious strength.

Azrak's eyes fairly blazed. There was a terror in their situation which supplanted his usually calm mien and preyed upon him by throes.

"We are lost!" said the African, huskily; and then, "See!—see the lamps!"

At the moment they had re-entered the ante-chamber, or den, the two lamps were burning a ghastly-greenish flame. A thin, scarce-perceptible smoke was floating in the air, and the change in the color of the flames, and the gathering of the smoke, were unobserved till Azrak inhaled an offensive, stifling odor that produced nausea, sudden weakness and a dizzy sensation.

"The lamps! The lamps!" he cried. "We are breathing poison!"

Even as the startled words broke from Azrak's lips, Hubert Ulster clapped his hands to his brow, and tottered away from the door. In another second, he fell to the stony floor, and his eyes glared wide and vacantly upward.

"Azzrak!" he groaned, faintly, "we are doomed. I am dying—I feel my heart at a standstill. My blood is cold. My brain whirls. My ears are ringing with strange sounds. Is this death gripping me? Off! I will live—I will! Oh, thou abominable Siler!—sorcerer!—devil!—Have you come to life to kill me at last! Help! Help! mercy, I say! It was not I who killed your father. I am innocent. Help! mercy!" but his voice was feeble, and his sight grew dimmer—and suddenly all was darkness.

For Azrak, with a mustering of his little remaining strength, reeled drunkenly across to the lamps, and at two quick sweeps of his fist sent them crashing to the floor, thus extinguishing them.

"Master Hubert! I—I die, I faint—I—" he was gasping but sunk down, overcome, ere he could complete his utterance.

Hardly had Azrak destroyed the source of the deadly fumes, plunging the apartment in total darkness, when another light flashed upon them. A small slide opened in the ponderous door, and through this fell the rays of a powerful lantern.

Presently a slim pole glided straight through the opening—a pole with a hook on its end, and this hook advanced until it fixed in the sable mantle that hid the immense picture on the easel. Dragging away the veil, the hooked pole vanished, and the rays of the lantern poured luminously on the painting.

Ulster was not yet so insensible, under the influence of the poisonous smoke, that he could not see the picture displayed to his staring eyes; his brain was not so dizzied that it could not receive the fresh shock of dread which the vision created; a picture, one half of the canvas representing the murder in the *Labyrinth*, with himself kneeling, knife in hand, over the corpse of Roderick Wirth; and the other half a tableau of the Spider and Agnes registering their mutual vow to hunt down the murderer of their father.

And while his frightened eyes beheld the scene—each human feature distinct as life and forcing a shuddering remembrance—there came a voice from the slide in the door:

"Hubert Ulster! 'Tis thus we avenge the death of our father! You will never see the light of the world again!—never!"

It was the voice of Agnes Wirth. Like a knell of judgment it rung in the vaulted chamber.

His lips moved as if imploring mercy; but

there was no sound, save an inarticulate whisper, a wordless rustle, and then a chaos of blackness settled upon his overtaken senses.

CHAPTER XXI.

MARTHA'S FRIGHT.

WREN Girasa rejoined Francoise Ellory, in the stone corridor, she immediately urged upon her to fly.

"Go," said the negress, "while there is yet time. Think not of saving him!"—pointing toward the vaulted chamber—"he is the murderer of my father and he must die!"

"See," half interrupted Francoise, "I do not think Jean Banquo is dead."

Girasa knelt quickly by the dwarf. Plucking a tiny glass mirror from the front of her turban, she held it eagerly to the mouth and nostrils of the astrologer. Then came a cry of glad surprise.

"He is not dead! Look; the glass is damp. Jean!—Jean Banquo!"

The gnome opened his eyes.

"Sister," he murmured, bewilderedly.

"Oh, Tyron! Are you dying—"

"No, no; 'tis but a wound, here—here, in my breast. Do not mind it. But I am weak, stunned. I shall be better soon. Ha!"—and he started as he observed Francoise standing near—"send her away, send her away—quick!"

"I will go," Francoise said, taking a step—but she paused: "The way? I cannot get out alone, for I do not know where I am."

"True. I am forgetful!" exclaimed Girasa. "Wait a moment."

Slipping off her turban and jacket, she made a pillow for the dwarf, who, not so seriously injured after all, was, himself, stanching and caring for the bullet-wound in his shoulder.

"Come."

The negress reproduced the bandage and blindfolded her companion.

"Tell me who you are?" asked Francoise, while her eyes were being closed; for when Girasa had removed the turban, a wealth of magnificent golden hair had fallen over her shoulders, reaching below the waist—hair that never belonged to any of the ebon-skinned race she personated.

"Do not be inquisitive. It can make no difference to you who I am," was the reply.

Taking Francoise by the wrist, she dragged her hurriedly away.

Before permitting her to pass the front door, and halting in the impenetrable dark of the entry, Girasa said, very solemnly:

"Francoise Ellory, do you know that Hubert Ulster is no uncle of yours?"

"So Jean Banquo, your master, has told me."

"Ah! then he must have told you all!" exclaimed the negress.

"I don't know what you mean by 'all'; but he divulged a great deal."

"Francoise Ellory, the man who pretends to be your uncle, is the assassin who stabbed my father. My brother and I swore to destroy him. He is at this moment breathing deadly poison, and is doomed. Before you depart from here, you must sacredly promise that you will not betray what is transpiring in this house, nor interfere in any way with our vengeance on Hubert Ulster."

"And what if I refuse to promise this?"

"Then you shall die too!" said Girasa, in an accent of terrible calmness; and Francoise heard the ominous click of a pistol-cock.

"Enough, I promise. Let me out."

The moment the door opened, she sprang forth as if she expected to receive a blow in passing; and once fully out of the place where had transpired so much to startle and unnerve her, she breathed freer.

The cab which had brought her was still in waiting. As she was borne rapidly toward her home, she started with a sudden thought. It occurred to her that she was leaving a human life in peril—the life of the man who was only denounced as a villain and impostor by these parties whose veracity she had no substantial cause to rely upon.

But while conjecturing on the right or wrong of her course, the cab paused before the house on Elliot avenue, and here other events immediately transpired to absorb her attention.

To her surprise, she found the front door unfastened; to her further astonishment, the house appeared to be entirely deserted.

"This is very singular! I left Martha in charge. Where can she be?" and she called, going from room to room: "Martha! Martha! where are you? Oh, Martha!"

And finally descending to the kitchen, she repeated the call:

"Martha! Martha, I say! Ah! who can that be?" the last as she heard the front door open and shut; then footsteps in the upper hall.

Hastening up she found Martha, who wore a pale, scared face; and accompanying the cook was Gilbert Montrose, the model maker.

"Martha, where have you been? What is the matter?" she demanded of the apparently-frightened cook, and nearly ignoring the model-maker.

"Oh, Miss Francoise! I couldn't stay here, indeed I couldn't," clasping and wringing her hands.

"Couldn't stay here. What do you mean, Martha?"

"This house is haunted—full of ghosts!"

"Haunted?" echoed Francoise.

Gilbert Montrose smiled.

"Yes, it is haunted—I know it. Some time after you went out miss, I heard something bang and rattle on the floor, and the most screechy noises and groans, and hammering and wailing. It was awful. Screams came from the walls all round, and I thought I heard people walking alongside of me. It's the ghost of that poor little Viola, who disappeared yesterday—I know it is, miss. Something terrible's happened to her. Or, I can't stay here, and have the ghost of that murdered girl haunting me! and she is murdered. I am sure!" and Martha wrung her hands afresh, groaning woefully.

"Nonsense, Martha!"

"It's true!" declared the trembling cook. "I was so frightened, I sworn right away, and lay for ever so long." (It was while Martha was overcome to insensibility by her fright, that Coco Vargas visited the house, and found no one nor anything except the note left for him by Francoise, which Martha had been instructed to deliver.) "As soon as I got over it, I ran out to the street for help. I met Mr. Montrose, here, and he came with me. Oh, Miss Francoise, if you value your life, don't go into the dining-room?"

"Ah! the dining-room?"

"Let us investigate in the dining-room," said Gilbert, calmly. "Evidently something has scared this woman. Come, Miss Ellory," and there was a peculiar stress on her name, as he spoke it; "we do not fear ghosts."

Martha protested imploringly. But they proceeded toward the dining-room, and flung open the door.

Instantly they were saluted by a wild scream, a shriek from the opposite wall.

"Miss Francoise! Mr. Montrose! Oh, God! help—help me!"

The superstitious Martha uttered a piercing wail, fell to her knees, and buried her face in her apron. Despite her own strong nerves, Francoise turned pale.

But the model-maker acted differently. He had discovered an object, as he looked in the direction of the cry, which, though it dispelled all idea of any unnatural presence, startled him and held him, for a second, spellbound.

Directly in the pipe-hole—the cover of which had been beaten out—he beheld a human face.

And again the owner of this face screamed, appealingly.

"Help me! Help me! I cannot endure much longer!"

He sprang to the hole, and as he did so, Francoise—who just then perceived the face and recognized the voice—exclaimed, incredulously:

"Great Heaven! can it be possible? Viola! Viola!"

"Help, Miss Francoise! Oh, help!"

Gilbert Montrose was tearing at the pipe-hole till his fingers bled. Francoise grasped him by the arm.

"Run to the cellar, Gilbert; you'll find a pick-ax there. Quick, Martha, and show him the way. Rouse, woman!"

Martha was herself again. She, too, had recognized the maid; and no longer preyed upon by her dread of ghosts, she hurriedly led the way to the cellar.

In a few seconds Gilbert returned, and his sturdy arms drove the pick through mortar and bricks—the same pick Ulster had used for another purpose on the previous night. Thud! thud! thud! struck the heavy pointed iron, wielded by a vigorous muscle. The plaster from the wall rattled down, and brick-chips and mortar scattered briskly round the earnest worker.

Forcing an opening at last, he reached in

and dragged out the girl—a shuddering spectacle.

Covered with dust and soot, her bare arms lacerated and bleeding; her clothing torn, dragged, hanging in shreds; her whole appearance ghastly, and thrilling them with horror.

"Viola! in the name of Heaven, what does this mean?" Francoise stared at her, overwhelmed with amazement.

Viola only gasped faintly:

"Drink! Give me drink! I have had nothing—I have suffered—oh, give me water!" Allaying her thirst, they conveyed her to a room and a bed, when her pitiable condition was, in a measure, relieved.

Her story was soon told, commencing with her detection as she spied upon the doings of Ulster and Azrak in the paneled room.

Recovering consciousness in the black solitude of the deserted wine-cellar, she was immediately attacked by the rats. Hungry, ravenous little animals, they swarmed upon her in countless numbers, and palsied her, at first, by their ferocity.

But the sharp bite of their teeth aroused her. Desperate, hopeless even, stung to madness and a superhuman strength by the gnawing, snapping, scratching of the poisonous fangs, she shook them off in frantic resistance, stamped and tossed her arms, running hither and thither, shrieking as we have heard—faint, despairing, yet penetrating the ears of the man who had consigned her to the horrible fate.

As she beat frenziedly about, retreating in the darkness—while the rats poured thicker, more savagely upon her—she came in contact with an old, unused, high brick furnace (for the place had not always been used as a wine-cellar only) and the discovery caused her heart to bound with courage.

Straining to her utmost, while she dared not cease her battle with the rats, she clambered to the top of this furnace, panting, exhausted, quivering as she hearkened to the racing of tiny feet below her.

She could hear them leaping up at her. Their numbers were increasing, till at last the din of squeals, the pattering gallop of clawed feet, the rebounding of bodies, and an incessant gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, near the furnace, all iced her veins, made her aching head swim, and a voice of mockery seemed hissing into her shrinking ears: "*Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats!*"

"And in at the windows, and in at the door, And through the walls, helter-skelter they pour, And down through the ceiling, and up through the floor, From the right and the left, from behind and before."

How long she remained there she knew not. There was no window nor opening to the place. Perhaps she fell asleep on the top of the furnace—a sleep of exhaustion—and awoke again, to find herself still accompanied by that shroud of eternal night. The scampering noises below her, and the gnawing and squeaking around her had ceased.

Weak with thirst, she ventured to descend, in hopes of finding her way to the wine-shelves and bottles. But her enemies were alert. She was attacked; rats, rats, rats as thirsty as she—thirsty for her blood!—and she was compelled to fight her way back to the furnace, bitten and torn at every step.

Hours that seemed ages elapsed. The next day came and went—a month of terrors and torture to the beset sufferer.

Then a new horror; the rats had not been idle. They succeeded in gaining the furnace, relentless in their pursuit of human food.

More ferocious, and in dozens, they fastened on their prey. Again their needle-like teeth pierced her flesh, wringing shrieks of anguish from her lips; and her shrieks then were what first alarmed Martha the cook.

She felt that she was going mad—and such a death! But in her extreme of despair there came a thought to the unfortunate girl.

The flue! the flue!

Exerting herself in a new courage, she shook off her tormentors and groped to the flue at the back of the furnace. Up this she climbed and reached the chimney-place in the dining-room. She knocked the cover from the crock-holes, and with a sinking spirit roused those unearthly echoes in the house which had still further terrified the superstitious cook.

And all this agony, this narrow escape from a frightful doom, the mesh and heartlessness of Hubert Ulster.

Viola had scarce completed the recital of her suffering when she was overcome by absolute weakness, and swooned upon the pillow.

"Gilbert," said Francoise, drawing the model-maker aside, while Martha tenderly administered to the insensible girl, "come here a minute; I desire to speak with you."

Gilbert Montrose followed her from the room. He saw that she had something serious to say; and as he walked behind her, there was a glow in his face, a soulful glance, that betrayed how his heart worshiped this lovely woman.

For we may easily infer that he loved the beautiful blonde, had wooed her in vain—infer it from the words of Jean Banquo, when he warned Francoise that it would be better to "give back" her affection to Montrose, the model-maker, than to think of wedding Coco Vargas, who was unworthy of her favors.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PLOT—THE CONFESSION.

THE lieutenant of the police of northern St. Louis was seated in his little sideroom, adjoining the squire's office, perusing a rather sensational document which had just been brought to him.

It was not the more thorough metropolitan force that exists to-day which then evoked law, order and tranquillity in the Mound City; still there was a system, an efficiency, which that western metropolis was among the foremost to inaugurate, and which bestows on it credit.

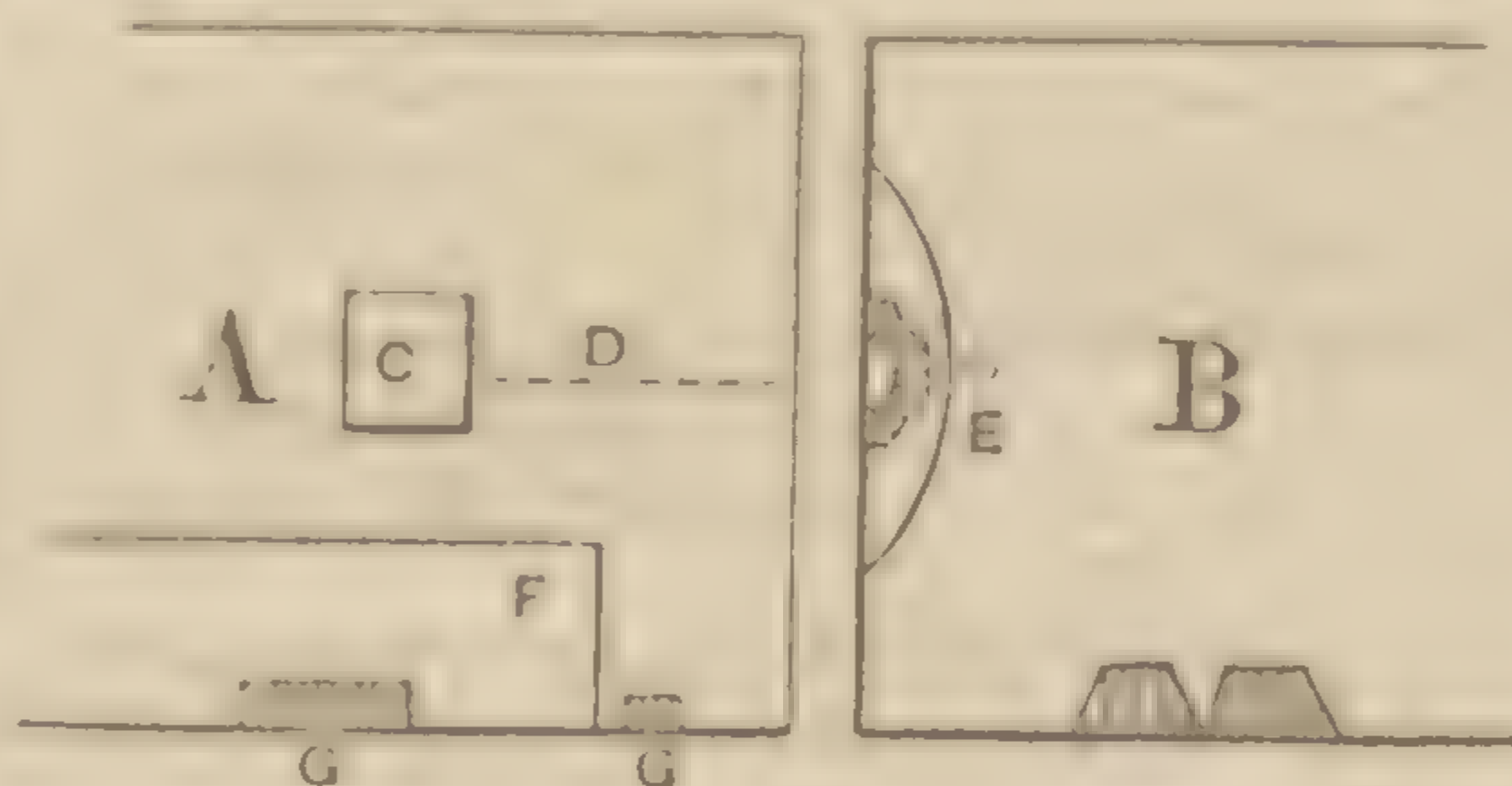
With two of his brother-officers, who leaned interestedly over the back of his chair, he was scanning the manuscript which Nelson and Grego had delivered promptly, according to the instructions of Favia Claremont.

And this is what the paper contained:

"CITY OF ST. LOUIS, in the year 18—, 9 mo.

"To our three selves, and no more; under secrecy, oath, penalty.

"By the following plan we may obtain our object and the result riches.



"See figure A, the storehouse 903, adjoining Merchants' Bank (B), and now unoccupied.

"(C), a hole, vertical, terminating in a burrow (D), which leads, by correct measurement, directly beneath the fire-proof safe (E).

"Under this point deeper excavation, to give room for work.

"The bottom part of the safe is of thin iron—not more than 5-8 in., set on stone pave.

"With jackscrews and a tempered chisel of necessary size—aided by an acid—this bottom of 5-8 in. iron may be cut as easily as butter.

"The interior gained, the drawers are quickly forced.

"The screen and counter (F), will cover our operations from parties changing at door or window (G).

"Then to the boat on the levee—our spoil in sacks. Then to New Orleans.

"Be well armed, for there is danger.

"If discovered, let no man be taken alive. If successful, share and share alike."

There were no names betraying the identity of the parties. But the note accompanying the manuscript, which Favia Claremont had written, was as follows:

"SIR—By the inclosed it will be seen that there is a plan afoot to rob the Merchants' Bank. In making the discovery, I have accidentally captured the ringleader. If you are active, you may secure the others. When they are caught, I will hand over my prisoner.

"(Signed)

Y. B."

The lieutenant started from his chair.

"Who the deuce is 'Y. B., detective'? Never heard of any man with those initials."

"An assumed name, no doubt. What's your opinion?" returned and questioned one of the officers.

"My opinion?" exclaimed the lieutenant, who was a man of easy excitement, "hang it! it's the cutest piece of rascality ever concocted—"

"Which—the communication?"

"Confound you!—no! This"—rapping the MS.—"this scheme. We must spring a trap on these scoundrels. But I would like to see this 'Y. B.', whoever he may be."

"Perhaps 'he' is a 'she'?" suggested officer No. 2.

"Hey? By the nose of Jove! I wish I'd kept those shabby fellows who brought the

paper and the letter." And then, as he gave the document a final inspection, "Give that locality your attention—903, next Merchants' Bank. You can take it by turns—one till morning, the other at daylight till twelve, six-hour beat. Hang it! I'll look around myself. It'll be feathers in your caps if you spoil a burglary of this kind. Keep mum, too.—Eh? How the deuce am I to find this mysterious 'Y. B.', who has the ringleader in custody?"

903, the suspicious warehouse, was under surveillance within an hour. But the night passed without any discovery of moment.

Next day the second policeman went on duty of vigil, and at noon was relieved.

The two were on the point of separating, when they saw a man approach hastily and enter 903, closing the door and throwing open the window, and who bestowed no particular attention upon the loiterers, they being disguised to conceal their office.

This individual was shortly followed by a second man, and on the appearance of the last, the two watchers exchanged glances of surprise. They had recognized Coco Vargas—whom they happened to know well—and observed that he first entered the bank itself, then looked warily about before entering the warehouse.

"I say, Henry!" exclaimed one, "do you know that bird?"

"To be sure I do. It's Coco Vargas—"

"You are right!" said a voice behind them.

They turned to be confronted by a female, thickly veiled, and who immediately added:

"It is Coco Vargas, as vile a Spaniard as ever lived! Last night I had him in my power; but he escaped. I am 'Y. B.' If you want the robbers who are plotting against the Merchants' Bank, they are there. Coco Vargas leads them!"

She leveled a finger toward the warehouse. Then, before they could detain her, she disappeared amid the throng.

Of course it was Favia Claremont. She, too, had been watching 903.

"I say, Henry, here's a merry plot! Didn't I tell you 'Y. B.' might be a woman? But make speed, and report to the lieutenant. Tell him we've got a dot on the chap at 903."

We must return to Coco Vargas, who followed the lead of Davie, the ruffian, after his fortunate escape from the power of Favia Claremont.

They proceeded to a narrow, darkly-shadowed alley on Olive street, and here Davie entered a shabby-fronted house.

Along an entry shrouded in pitchy blackness—groping their way up a rickety flight of stairs, to a room as murky as the hall below and the alley without.

"The curst candle's out!" grumbled Davie, as he struck a match and ignited a fresh dip.

"There he is on that 'ere bed—see him?"

A stiffly-motionless form lay on the scant couch. Vargas saw only a man's head, bandaged, plastered, and the folds of linen and the edge of the counterpane were stained and spotted with red.

Under the bandages—that had evidently been arranged by a clumsy hand—a face that was sallowly white, and lips breathing low groans of pain.

"I fixed him up the best I could," said Davie, fixing the wick, "an' there ain't been nobody to see him yet, 'cept you an' me."

"Ho, Captain Baxter!"—Vargas strode to the bedside. "Caramba! you are badly hurt!"

"No—don't, don't!" moaned the bruised and injured man. "Don't take me! Oh! how I do repent it."

"Eh? Repent what?" queried Vargas.

"It was not all my fault!—mercy!" continued Baxter, as if his mind wandered. "Do not hang me; I'll confess all—all—all!"

"The devil!" muttered Vargas, glancing at Davie—and Davie winked—"he'll confess all. Not if we can help it. Eh?"

"I say, Cap, do you think he's going to die?" asked the ruffian, in a whisper.

"Die? Certainly. Caramba! his head is completely mashed—see it." And then, as he tapped the recumbent man lightly on the shoulder: "Ho, Baxter! do you know us? Look!"

"Yes, yes, you have come to take me for the murder. Oh, God! how my head aches. I couldn't help it; he attacked me, and I stabbed him—I—" his breath failed, and his form twitched in a convulsive throes.

Vargas opened wide his eyes. Davie puckered his mouth and gaped.

"Ho, I see!" Vargas exclaimed, "this rogue has stabbed somebody. He is going to die, and wants to confess—"

"Who said I was going to die? Who said that?" demanded Baxter, suddenly, and starting, with a great strain, to his elbow.

The Spaniard and the ruffian drew back a pace before the ghastly-bloody countenance.

"You didn't see me do it," he cried, hoarsely, leveling and shaking a forefinger at them.

"You were not there—only us two, and he attacked me first. Then I slew him. But I didn't mean to strike so deep. Ah! what am I saying?" His manner altered abruptly, a different light came into his inflamed eyes, and he sunk down upon the pillow, moaning:

"Coco Vargas—Davie—I am glad you have come. Where have you been, Davie? Did you fetch the minister?"

"Caramba!"—Vargas stepped forward again to the bed. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes—yes," slowly.

"Then mind what I say: you are about to die—"

"No, no, no!" Baxter almost shrieked.

"Furies of thunder! can't I see that plainly?" and Vargas spoke the truth. "It is impossible for you to live another hour, with that crushed head, and this bruised breast," here he pulled down the covering and laid bare a breast that was frightfully lacerated. "So, whatever you have to confess, out with it, quickly."

Baxter rolled his head round on the blood-wet pillow; rolled his eyes, too, wildly in their sockets; and a terrible expression came into his face.

"Coco Vargas," he gasped, as if the utterance choked him, "I cannot die! Don't let me die! Oh, save me—save me!"

"Caramba! How can I do that? You are a dead man beyond help. You have now only half an hour," consulting his watch, and winking again at Davie; "whatever is on your mind, tell us."

"Send for a minister—haste, then. Go. I will tell."

"Diablos! I am a minister myself. Hurry with your confession."

Baxter shut his teeth, grindingly.

"And is this my end?" he muttered, audibly, gripping the bed-clothes, breathing hard through his nostrils, while some anguishing thought seemed to wring his very soul.

"Water! water!" he cried, in frantic accents; "I burn. There's fire in my heart! Something is gnawing at my brain! Water! I perish!—help!" and he dragged madly at the covering, beating his bruised temples, howling and gibbering like a man tongue-tied and under the knot.

Davie held a cup of water to his lips. The draught appeared to strengthen him.

"Oh, this terrible fever!" Baxter mumbled, brokenly. "I am burning and freezing by turns. My veins are ice, my head is a furnace. Yes, I must be dying. Come nigher. I can hardly speak. Let me whisper. How very weak I grow!"

"Now you have only fifteen minutes left," said the Spaniard, twirling his slim goatee, with savage impatience, and watching Baxter's paroxysms with hawkish intensity. "Only fifteen minutes, I say. Did you hear?"

"Let up, let up," whispered Davie; for, ruffian as he was, he did not like the way of Coco Vargas, who evidently tormented the hapless ship-captain, with the object of hastening his confession. "Don't be so infernal sharp on a chap about to 'pass back his charter.' 'Tain't exactly human—leastwise, I can't put up 'ith it now."

There was a brief silence. Vargas held the watch in his hand, and the tick! tick! tick! of the timepiece was all that broke the solemn stillness.

"That beats faster and far stronger than my pulse," huskily spoke the ill-fated man. "And I am dying. There is no hope. Let me die with my mind unburdened a little."

"Yes; the minutes are going," pricked Vargas. "You had better talk quick."

Another silence. Then Baxter started a second time to his elbow.

"My hands are crimson with crime!" he screamed.

"Santissima!"

"Oh, my wickedness! I am doomed—damned! Satan is after me! I can already see the walls of flames and crisping souls! I am going

—going—going! How horrible to be damned! Off! Take your claws from my throat! Mercy! Pity! Unloose me, fiends! Save! save me!" He struck wildly out in the air above and around him; he snarled, and hissed, and uttered curses as he waved back and gripped at imaginary demons, devils, and goblins tormenting him; the room was filled with his wails and groans and cries, he hammered and tore at his head, till the bandages slipped and fresh blood streamed from the reopened wounds—the picture of his insane convulsion was horrifying.

"Furies of thunder!" shouted Vargas, in his ear, trembling in his eagerness to ascertain what the man's crime was, "out with that confession of yours. In three minutes you are a dead carcass! Ho! will you tell us what you have done? Quick, then! Caramba!" and he dragged nervously at his goatee, caught and shook roughly one of Baxter's waving, striking, sawing arms, and glared fiercely at the swollen lips that were so tediously tardy in divulging the secret of their owner's guilt.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BURIED IN THE WALL.

FRANCOISE led the model-maker into the room adjoining that in which lay Viola, the maid. She was looking very serious, as if debating in hesitation the subject she purposed speaking on.

But before we show what the beautiful blonde had to say to Gilbert Montrose, we will revert to a brief episode which will explain the origin and intimacy of her acquaintance with the early lover of Favia Claremont.

Montrose had taken a straight course from Cairo, Egypt, to the United States, after that night when he ceased to love the woman whose hands, he thought, were dyed with murder.

He had sold everything he possessed, including some property which he owned in Chichester—before starting in quest of Favia, on the Nile; and then, at the subsequent period mentioned, with a small capital and an indomitable will, had begun life anew in America, striving to forget the face of the woman he once adored.

An excellent and sober workman, he applied himself industriously to his trade, at his shop on Rappahannock street, St. Louis—having settled in that city, and by diligence advanced to celebrity and fortune, winning encomiums from his fellow craftsmen.

It was a tempestuous night about thirteen months preceding the first chapter of our story, that Gilbert Montrose happened on Gravois Road—having spent the day at a friend's house, in the suburbs, in feast and merriment. The storm broke upon him just outside the boundary.

Quickening his pace, to gain shelter, he was on the point of entering a house near by, when he heard a terrific shriek above the howling wind.

The shriek was accompanied by the noise of galloping horse—hoofs, the dull rumble of wheels—then another scream, evidently from some one in great danger. By the rapid flashes of lightning, he saw—coming headlong and wild through the gloom—a pair of plunging snorting horses, dragging a cab that swung from side to side, dashing furiously onward to destruction.

One window of the cab was open, and a white, terrified face was protruding, whose owner had uttered those loud, pealing cries which startled him.

There was not a moment to be lost. The furious team was already within a few yards. If there was help it must be rendered instantly.

Leaping down from the steps, he grasped up a monstrous cobble-stone. As the runaways thundered past, he hurled the great stone with all his strength at the nearest beast.

Few men possessed a keener eye or steadier nerve than Gilbert Montrose. A powerful muscle and accurate aim sent the cobble crashing into the brute's brain; with a snort almost human it fell, and upon and over him the other horse, the cab, all in a struggling heap.

Montrose quickly snatched forth the occupant of the overturned vehicle—a female, and she had fainted.

As he held her in his arms for a moment, in the pelting rain, the din of thunder and the roar of rushing wind, the lightning flashed again, and showed him the face of the being

he had saved—a face that then imprinted itself on his heart, and forever banished all lingering recollection of a former affection.

In the storm, the howling, the desolation of the road, he loved her upon that first accidental glimpse.

Bearing her to a house, where she was promptly and tenderly cared for, Gilbert returned to extricate the second horse, which, unhurt but thoroughly subdued, was standing placidly in the tempest.

"I trust you are not injured much?" he inquired, re-entering the house, where he found her fully recovering from her swoon.

"Thank Heaven! not at all. I am safe. And you are my preserver. I can never be grateful enough for the service you have done me. I went to visit an old schoolmate this afternoon, and the storm frightened the horses as we were coming back. I fear the driver of the cab was killed. I saw him fall from his box a good way up the road—"

"No, he is at this minute attending to his property. Poor fellow—he had a narrow escape, and now mourns the loss of his horse. It was the only chance; to kill the brute. I shuddered when I saw the cab roll over, for I thought it would be your death also."

"But, I do not yet know my preserver. What is your name?" asked the young girl.

"I am Gilbert Montrose, the model-maker."

"And my name is Francoise Ellory,"—as their hands met in a hearty clasp.

From that night there existed a warm friendship between Francoise and the model-maker—a friendship that, in the course of a year, assumed the phase of reciprocal affection.

Gilbert regularly visited at the house. At the expiration of eleven months he ventured to propose marriage.

Unfortunately for the model-maker's hopes, Francoise had met Coco Vargas at a private mask, about three months before Gilbert asked her to wed him, and the Spaniard also became a suitor for the hand of the banker's niece. Fascinated, as it were, by the bold, dashing style of her new lover, she had gently but definitely refused the offer of Montrose, who honestly worshiped her. Since the rejection of his suit, he had not called to see her. Had it not been for the chance of Martha's superstitious scare, he would never again have gone into the presence of the beautiful blonde.

Closing the door, when they had entered the next room, Francoise turned upon him and gazed hard into his face, deep into his eyes, which never once moved from her. Her cheeks were dyed with mounting blood, and her own eyes sparkling. For a second there was unbroken silence.

"Gilbert," she said, at last, "what will you think of me when you hear what I have to say? Perhaps you will spurn me."

"What is it, Francoise?" he asked, calmly; but her manner, her looks, had instantly sent a warm thrill to his heart, that made his face glow with anticipation.

"Gilbert, three months ago you asked me to be your wife—"

"Francoise!" he exclaimed, with a start.

"And I rejected you. Oh, Gilbert, it was not because I could not love you—I *did* love you. It was my folly. I owed my life to you. An unhappy fate brought me in contact with one who fascinated me—'fascinated'; there is no other term for it. That man was Coco Vargas, whom you once met here. It could not have been affection I bestowed upon him. But, why should I say this much? I am sorry. I retract what I said to you then. I will try—Oh, Gilbert! I love you!"

She had obeyed the warning of the astrologer.

"Coco Vargas!" thought Gilbert, unable to conceal a frown; "and was it for *that* libertine and gambler she stung my soul to unhappiness?" But the frown quickly faded, he heard only her confession of penitence; and holding open his arms, he cried, quivering with joy:

"Francoise! Dear Francoise!"

In a moment she had bounded to his embrace, and he held her tightly, kissing her lips of red and sweets.

"Oh, Francoise! this repays me for all the sadness I have endured since that wretched night!"

"And do you love me still, Gilbert?"

"Love you?—yes, and will forever, dear Francoise!"

"Then the life you once saved is yours."

Viola had recovered from her faint, and

Martha was seated by the bed, with a warm cup of tea which she had made and brought, when Francoise appeared in the doorway.

"Martha, do you remain here until I call you. Do not leave the room, under any circumstances, before you hear my voice."

"Yes, miss. But will it be long? I thought I'd go to bed if—"

"Perhaps not long. If you are tired, lie down on the sofa and sleep. I may return before you are awake again. I do not wish you to leave the room, Martha."

"Very well, miss," consented the cook, who wondered why her young mistress should make such a request, for she did not see what difference it would be whether she retired to her own bed—the hour then being late—since Viola was quite comfortable.

But Francoise had an object. She had revealed to Gilbert Montrose, whose betrothed she now was, the scheme of her pretending uncle to obtain the contents of the secret closet without her knowledge—also informing him of the astrologer's declarations concerning Ulster's assumption of a relationship that did not exist at all between the families of Ellory and Ulster.

While they mutually resolved that the banker must be the absolute villain intimated by Jean Banquo—the tale of the waiting-maid and other circumstances reasonably qualifying such a conclusion—they also determined to seek the hidden repository, and explore its mystery at once.

And it was with a view to keeping their movements private that Francoise had enjoined upon Martha not to leave the side of Viola, while she and Gilbert proceeded to the apartment adjoining the paneled room.

"If this charlatan has spoken truthfully," Gilbert had said, when Francoise narrated in full her interview with the astrologer, "we can soon get at the treasure. I think there has enough transpired to free you entirely from the control of the man who pretends to be your uncle, and who, under cover of your father's will, appointing him guardian, has not only deceived you and sought to select your husband, but tried to rob you. He never looked upon me with favor, because I am a mechanic. But here we are. Let us see."

Carefully shutting the door after them as they entered, the pair advanced to the mantelpiece.

"See, Gilbert, there is the vase that has stood for so many years untouched. That pipe hole, yonder, does not open to a flue, Jean Banquo said, but it is a ventilator to the secret closet. He instructed me to turn the vase round thrice, I think."

"Then turn it, Francoise."

Gilbert remained quietly to one side. Francoise advanced and grasped the vase.

Twisting round smartly this odd knob to the hidden spring, expecting to see the wall open, both she and Gilbert Montrose were startled by a dull report overhead—and out of the pipe-hole poured a shower of burning rags, like wad from a belching cannon, together with thick, sulphurous smoke, and a succession of sharper cracks, ejecting innumerable balls of blazing stuff, causing them to retreat in dismay.

Francoise had turned the vase in the wrong direction!

And a combustible contrivance—which Eli Ellory had invented at the time of building the closet, and which even the crafty Spider had failed, through mere chance, to discover, and which had remained all these years ready to burst—for a moment drove them back with its hissing, crackling, smoking, as if some ambushed fiend was aroused and breathing his breath of flame upon them.

"By Heaven! I believe the closet is there!" cried the model-maker, springing forward. "If Jean Banquo knew so much, this is an infernal trick of his to frighten any one venturesome enough to penetrate it. I fear neither Jean Banquo nor his devilish arts!"

"Gilbert! Take care!" warned Francoise, trembling.

But his gripe was on the vase. Giving it half a dozen jerking turns—and these turns, accidentally, in the right way—he immediately uttered a cry.

The whole mantelpiece, with its lower square of imitation paper wall, swung creakily outward, disclosing the interior of the closet.

"See, Francoise, it is here! And here, too, is the gold!"

A row of small, labeled bags on a half-high

shelving met their view, and Gilbert stepped quickly into the ingenious safe.

"Bring the light, Francois."

Taking up the lamp from the floor, where they had set it while testing the power of the vase, Francoise also entered. But she had scarcely gained his side, when a sharp exclamation fell from her lips.

"Gilbert! oh, Gilbert!"

He glanced behind and perceived their danger. The wall was closing! Throwing himself against it, he essayed with all his muscle to force it back. But the secreted springs were stronger than Gilbert Montrose; there was a bang and a click, and the thick wall closed them in.

Two things the Spider had not told Francoise—perhaps owing to the abrupt termination of their interview. The mantelpiece was arranged to reclose almost instantly, on return springs, of its own accord, and the means of opening it again, on the inside, the unlucky lovers did not know.

The other item will be shown anon.

"Oh, Gilbert! we are buried alive with our gold! We are lost!"

"Nay, dear Francoise"—he sprang hastily to catch the lamp that was about to fall from her nerveless hand, as she tottered against the shelves—"courage. This is but a trifling accident. We can easily beat our way out, I am sure."

But Gilbert Montrose was soon forced to share in her terror; for when he had kicked and pounded vainly on all sides, throwing his body with a giant's strength against this point and that, and around and about, failing to start the slightest crack, his own heart sunk, though he would not betray it to her.

He climbed to the circular ventilator, and hallowed loudly. But there were thick walls and massive doors between him and aid; and at that moment Martha was snoring soundly, and Viola slumbering so deep in her exhaustion that, had his despairing voice been heard, it might not have aroused them.

And as the model-maker held his face at the small ventilator, tasking his lungs with those prolonged wails for help, a sudden and deathly pallor blanched his cheek.

The mass of combustible and burning material that had poured from the pipe-hole a few moments before, had not expired. The room was aglow with tiny flames here and there, and these flames had communicated to the dry, bare flooring, increasing slowly but with horrible sureness.

He glared down at the flickering fires as they rose higher and higher. The muscles of his face twitched, and his stout spirit quavered, as he realized the awful doom which now threatened them.

"God help us!" he murmured, too low for Francoise to hear. "In a short time we will be burned to ashes! This room will soon be ablaze—then the whole house! My poor, poor Francoise!" Then again: "Martha! Viola! Help, here! help! H-ELP!"

"Gilbert, there is no hope for us. We shall die here. Martha will never look for us—she will think my order was to delude her, while we eloped, for she knows I love you, and that Hubert Ulster forbade my entertaining your suit. Viola will not suspect our fate. No hope, Gilbert—no hope!"

Francoise was calm now, terribly calm; but her hands clinched till the knuckles were white and blue, and her teeth were set like a vise.

"Poor girl—my poor, doomed Francoise," wailed the model-maker, to himself, "she knows not how near we are to death, nor what the horrors of that death will be!"

Though his very soul was shrinking, he showed it not. With true manhood, he concealed his own terror to encourage her.

And while he was endeavoring to soothe away her fears, a deafening sound broke upon their narrow prison—then another: heavy, crunching, splintering blows on the side toward the paneled room.

Some one was bursting open the wall with a pickaxe.

Presently, the splinters flew inward; the point of the iron tool was visible at every stroke, soon forcing a rough crevice—and through this crevice they heard the voice of the worker on the outside.

"The gold! The gold! I will get the gold. 'Sdeath! I am not yet cheated out of it. It is mine. I will have it. A curse on the warning on this paper—the gold shall be mine in spite of all the demons of perdition!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEIL BAXTER'S SECRET.

THE impatient snarl, the rough shaking, the fierceness with which Coco Vargas interrupted the ravings of the dying and brain-tortured ship-captain, had an instantaneous effect.

Baxter relaxed to a mood of sullen quiet, and the gaze of his bloodshot eyes dropped to the worm eaten floor.

"Keep me up—my head," he said, strainingly. "If I lie down I'll smother."

"So," mumbled Vargas, adjusting the pillow behind the sufferer's back, "now you are all right. Come—that confession of yours; and don't sputter and spit and claw like a crazy man again. We are waiting. Thunders, will you never commence?"

"You have known me as Captain Baxter—"

"Caramba! of course."

"Davie, here, has been a friend of mine some years. I never had a son Dick, as I made you believe. Davie and I were going to fix about the boat—"

"Ho! The devil! And what is all this to me? Do you hear me?—in ten minutes you will be ready for the undertaker. Talk to the point."

"Yes—to the point. I am dying. It grows colder. Hadn't you better start a fire in the hearth? There's wood in the cellar, Davie; plenty of driftwood."

"Satan pick his bones!" anathematized Vargas, inwardly, while the perspiration was starting on his brow, "he wants fire. Mayhap he'll get enough of that shortly. I shall give him another shaking if he provokes me much further!"

Baxter spoke again in short breaths; there was a momentary pause between each sentence. Life was fast going out of the mangled frame. A fearful look—one of pain, dread, the sting of a haunting memory—came into the disfigured countenance; his eyes scintillated like changeful silk in sunlight.

"Had it not been for me," the ship-captain went on, "Roderick Wirth, of Wirthmoor, England, never would have been murdered—"

"Caramba!" shouted Vargas, "what do you know of Roderick Wirth?" and he bent nigher in astonishment at mention of the name.

"I'll soon show. My name is Neil Baxter. I came from County Kent, England. My father and mother were poor, but gave me some schooling; and when I was twenty-one years old, I bade good-by to our little hop-farm, left home with my bundle and my stick on my shoulder, and started for the mills at Battel. I don't know, but it seemed I was born with the devil in me, for I fell into dissipation, and soon squandered the pocketful of gold-pieces my old mother worked hard to save for me. My companions were none of the best; and while I loitered at an inn, not far from the 'Angle of Sussex,' a place I guess you never heard of—"

"Oh, no! Caramba!" thought Vargas.

"—I found myself without a shilling to my name," finished Baxter. "I must have money to pay my debts—for I had gambled—and to make a fresh start. One night I skulked near Wirthmoor—there were three estates, called Wirthmoor, Ulster Manor and Claremont-wilde, and the plot of them made the 'Angle.' I was going to steal some silver plate, if I could; but the devil's luck ordained it otherwise. I was in a woody place known as the *Labyrinth*, when who should I see but Roderick Wirth himself, moving about as if he was hiding and watching somebody. 'Perhaps,' thought I, 'he has money in his pocket, and if I can get that, instead of the plate, I will be saved a deal of trouble.' So I stole behind him, and gave him a whack with a big club that laid him out. But, I didn't kill the man—"

"Oh, you didn't kill him, eh?" interrupted Vargas, sneeringly. "You didn't poke a knife into his neck?" and he wrinkled his nose, and brought his lips to the tip of the other's ears, as he uttered the insinuation. For the Spaniard, through his alliance with Tyron Wirth, was well acquainted with the particulars of the murder in the *Labyrinth*, as far as given to our readers. And he began to suspect that this man had driven the knife which cut short the life of Roderick Wirth.

"No, no, no: wait!" Baxter hastened to say.

"Roderick Wirth had a cowhide in his hand. It looked to me as if he was going to thrash somebody. Well, I hadn't time to search all his pockets when I heard footsteps. I ran into the shadow and spied. I saw Grafton Ulster

—who lived over at Ulster Manor—stalk rapidly forward. He stumbled over the body, then stopped. Wirth began to revive just then, and he squirmed and mumbled about this very Grafton Ulster—who, it appears, was courting his daughter—and beat the ground with his cowhide. I judged that this was the party he had been waiting for, and that the cowhide was meant for his back. I guess Grafton Ulster judged so, too. Such a face as he made, I never saw. The moon was shining square onto him, and I heard him hiss:

“So, you hoary-headed dog! you intended to waylay and cowhide me? We’ll see about that!”

“I saw that there was murder in him; but, somehow, I got so weak I could not budge. Before Wirth could scramble up—for that frightful hiss brought him to his senses—Ulster grappled with him. Wirth was weakened by the blow I had given him, and couldn’t resist much. Ulster drove a knife into his neck, and I heard him shriek:

“Oo, villain! you have stabbed me to death!”

“Ulster had barely committed the murder, when still another came on the spot—and this was Hubert Ulster, brother of the assassin. He had been up to the house, I suppose, for he came from that direction. He, too, tripped over the nearly dead man. In horror, he stooped to pull the knife from Roderick Wirth’s neck. Wirth was about half-conscious; and as he felt the hand fingering at his throat, he gasped:

“Ulster! Assassin!—God forgive you! you have killed me!”

“It happened, as he said this, that Tyron, the son of Roderick—who was called the Spider of Wirthmoor—was within earshot. He heard these last words of his dying father. Thinking that Hubert Ulster had done the deed, he threw himself, mad with revenge, on the innocent man. Ulster was too much for the dwarf son. He beat open his skull with a piece of wood. I didn’t wait to see more. My blood was frozen by what I had witnessed. I felt that I had taken part in the two murders. Rough and hardened as I had grown, the shedding of human blood was new and terrible to me. And it was all in consequence of my gently tapping Roderick Wirth on the head, to get his pocketbook. If he hadn’t been unstrung, he could have outmatched Grafton Ulster. I fled from there—from England. I have been haunted by two ghosts ever since that time. It’s now about ten years ago. Ten years of unrest for Neil Baxter. Guess my poor father and mother gave me up for dead long ago—if they’re alive. And I—but I didn’t really do much. I’m not so bad. Fan the fire, Davie—it’s getting cold. Plenty of driftwood in the cellar; throw ’em on. Be careful at the Bank. Don’t get caught. There’s a heap of money in the plot, Davie. You’ll make—I am going, Davie—you can’t help—it—

There was a gurgle in Baxter’s throat. His form stiffened out, and the stare of death came into his wide, vacant eyes.

To Davie, the ruffian, the confession was of no special interest. He uncovered his close-cut, bristling head, and with his brown, bony hand, smoothed shut the eyelids of the ghastly face on the pillow.

“Good-by, Bax.; you haven’t done so much wrong, after all,” he uttered, lowly, “and I hope you’ll get a safe passage over the river.”

But to Coco Vargas, the revelation was of tremendous import.

“Ho! Neil Baxter, this is news,” the Spaniard exclaimed, in excitement, and addressing the corpse. “It’s worth waiting to hear. I hope you won’t meet the ghosts of your dead men down below.” Then to Davie: “Sit up, you, with this lump of flesh to-night, and in the morning fetch the undertaker—hey? I’ll pay the costs. I’m off.”

“All right, Cap. that’s square. I don’t guess Bax. had any lucre, anyhow. I’ll tend to it. But I say”—as Vargas was moving toward the door—“when am I going to see you again?”

“To-morrow noon, at the warehouse.”

“You ain’t a-going to give up the plan, then?”

“Caramba! no. Meet me there after you have got rid of this dried meat.”

Vargas hurried from the rickety building. He directed his steps—long, quick, excited steps they were—straight toward the art gallery on Mississippi avenue. And as he half-

strode, half-ran along, he was muttering aloud:

“Caramba! what news! Ho! what unexpected information from this rogue with a mashed head. What a rare nut for the astrologer, Jean Banquo, the Spider, Tyron Wirth—the man of names and vengeance! A new phase in the twisting trail. Not Hubert, but Grafton Ulster it was who killed his father. It is reasonable. Neil Baxter could have no object in fabricating lies on his death-bed. I hasten to acquaint Jean Banquo with this. I fly—caramba!”

When he gained the rear room on the first floor, at the home of the astrologer, he paused in astonishment at the tableau discovered by the light of the swinging lamp.

The Spider lay on an improvised couch. Over him knelt Girasa—or Agnes Wirth, as we may as well now call her. The front of his jacket was thrown over, and Vargas saw, by the bandage of linen on the exposed shoulder, that he was wounded in some way.

“Hilloah! what does this mean?” he demanded, wondering.

A few words told all. The Spider narrated, briefly, all that had transpired in the den below.

“This wound is nothing,” he said, in conclusion. “By to-morrow I can walk about; in a week or so I shall be entirely well. Agnes, with the nerve of a true surgeon, has extracted the bullet.”

“A week or so,” thought Vargas, who examined the wound. “In two months, more like. This is an ugly hole, I vow.” Then, suddenly: “But where is Hubert Ulster?—if he was here, and shot you, and is now in your power?”

“There,” said Agnes, pointing to the trap.

“There! Where?” The Spaniard whirled round and glanced about.

“In the den! In the den!” cried Tyron Wirth, triumphantly. “He is doomed. No mortal aid can save him. Rejoice with me!—rejoice! My father is avenged to-night.”

“Caramba!”

“He is locked in the den, and I poisoned the lamps!” said Agnes, in a tone no less stern and merciless than her brother’s. “By this time he has breathed enough of the foul air to kill him twice over—”

“Furies of thunder! Hubert Ulster must not die!”

Vargas sprang to the stone staircase.

“Ha! Coco Vargas, what are you at there? Stop, I say!”

“Hubert Ulster must not die!” he called back, as he sped toward the door of the den.

“Agnes! Agnes!” the avenger screamed, “that man is a traitor. Quick! my pistols!”

In a rage he pounded the floor with his fists, crawling forward from the couch of carpets, and his face contorted dreadfully.

Agnes bounded up-stairs to the saloon, and entered the closet containing the electric battery.

From a drawer she procured a brace of loaded pistols, and hastened full speed back to her brother.

The Spider grasped and cocked the weapons. Refusing any assistance, he tottered forward to the trap, sunk to his knees, and stretching his dwarfed body so that he had a clear view of the staircase, he awaited the reappearance of Coco Vargas.

“Ho, up there!” came the Spaniard’s voice, from the far end of the subterranean corridor, “fetch down that light. I fear there’s a couple of dead men here.”

“Vile traitor!” hissed the dwarf, grinding his teeth, while his ugly face grew perfectly hideous, “have we taken you into our confidence, to have you defer our vengeance at last? You are drawing a bullet to your heart—be ware!”

“Coco Vargas must perish, too, brother!” said Agnes, and her accent was of icy firmness.

“The dog shall die!” returned the Spider, choking in his rage, and raising his voice, he shouted through the corridors:

“Accursed and treacherous Spaniard! you, too, shall meet your doom down there! You shall never pass this trap alive!”

There was an ominous stillness below. Presently the voice of Vargas, very low, faint, and his words inaudible, as if talking to some one in an undertone.

And silence reigned above. The brother and sister at the trap were rigid as statues.

Tyron Wirth’s hand trembled as he leveled the pistols to bear upon the foot of the stair-

case; but there was a determined, ferocious gleaming in his small, serpent eyes—and two bullets, to speed with destructive hate, awaited their target in the seeming traitor!

CHAPTER XXV.

SEEKING THE PROOF.

AGNES had left the powerful lantern so arranged with its lens to the slide in the door of the den that its rays might rest steadily on the monstrous painting before the upturned face of the dying man.

It was her intent to keep the picture of the deed in the *Labyrinth* in view of Hubert Ulster’s eyes, that he might die—for he was dying in the foul poison of the atmosphere with this reminder burning torture into his brain, and racking his soul with a realization of fast-closing vengeance.

For, surer than steel, or bullet, or potion, or cord, was the deadly fume that had poured so densely from the lamps ere Azrak, with his last expiring strength, dashed out their smoking flame.

Coco Vargas swept aside the lantern at a blow of his fist, then growled a curse of regret, for, when he swung round the bar, flung open the door, and stepped into the vaulted chamber—first, being nearly stifled and compelled to bury his face in his cloak, so thick was the poisonous air of the place—he found himself in utter darkness.

The draught through the corridor sucked out and evaporated much of the baleful smoke. Then he ventured forward.

But the foul air was not all gone. As he struck a match, its flame ignited the whole gaseous surrounding; there was a lurid glare, a dull, shaking report, like the bursting of a large drum, and Vargas was hurled violently through the curtains into his own chamber, while the painting, the easel, and everything else in the apartment, came shivering and clattering down.

When the Spaniard returned to the outer chamber, he found the floor covered with tiny, greenish flames, flickering and smoking. The explosion had relighted what remained of the whitish powder thrown by Agnes on the wicks, and which was scattered by the fist of Azrak. Vargas’s face was hideously grimed; his garter was singed off short.

The explosion of gas had pitched him, without injuring him, in the very direction he wished to go; nor was he long in the apartment beyond the curtains.

Hastening to the side of Hubert Ulster—able to discern, dimly, by the little flickering fiery pools around, that were smoking a fresh supply of poison—he sunk to one knee and lighted a second match. With the match he set fusing three darkish pastilles which he had secured in his own chamber, and these he placed in a triangle, at the crown of the head and the two ears of the prostrate banker.

“Whatever you have inhaled from these damnable lamps,” he muttered, as if the motionless bodies of Ulster and Azrak were attentive auditors, “this will be an antidote to the poison, if you are not too far gone. Caramba! you must not die by the hand of the Spider. You are an innocent man, if there’s truth at all in the villainous carcass of Neil Baxter. I think, Hubert Ulster, banker, you have had a narrow escape; and I think also your chances are slim even now,” as he lighted the third pastille. “As I snuff this air, it savors strongly of death. I hope I may save you. It will be hard to convince Jean Banquo that you are not the murderer he takes you to be; but he must believe, for I have proof. Malediction! let Hubert Ulster live. These pastilles may rescue him, I hope,” and this was the mumbling overheard by Tyron and Agnes as they waited, stern and angry, at the head of the stone staircase.

Having taken these measures toward resuscitating the victim of the Spider, he paused to stamp out the little green blazing heaps, and then hurried back along the narrow corridor.

The instant he reached the foot of the stairs a pistol banged from above.

“Furies of thunder!” he exclaimed, leaping aside and backward, as the bullet whizzed unpleasantly close to his ear.

He saw Tyron Wirth in a kneeling posture, leveling the weapons, and behind his shoulder the black-stained face of Agnes.

He only had time to see this—see it indistinctly in the faint background of light afforded by the swinging lamp—when the second pistol banged, and another bullet whistled

within an inch of his brow, singing spitefully along the corridor.

"*Caramba!*" he cried, jumping again.

But as the exclamation burst from his lips, he stepped forward boldly and placed one foot on the bottom of the staircase.

He was aware that Tyron Wirth kept two loaded pistols in the drawer of the closet in the saloon, and he knew that these were the weapons used against him by the Spider—the only weapons in the house, save his own, which he carried—for he had heard their crack often before.

Assured now that there were no more bullets to hiss at or probably perforate him, he began ascending the stone steps, with his gaze on the angry dwarf, and shouting at the same time:

"Look out, up there, with those pop-guns! *Caramba!* I will be shot if you do it more. And I have a pistol, too; so take care. You are mad because I have tried to save Hubert Ulster. Ho! wait till you hear what I have to tell you. He must not die. Ha! *Santissima! Carajo!*"

His speech was cut short by receiving a blow on the head, which knocked him fairly off his feet, and sent him tumbling to the bottom of the stone stairs.

Had it not been for the uncertain gloom of the corridor, the bullets fired by Tyron Wirth would have hit their mark. Doubly enraged at the failure of the shots, and at seeing Vargas so boldly ascending—and cursing his trembling hand, to which he attributed his wide aim—the Spider drew back an arm and hurled one of the empty pistols furiously at the Spaniard's head.

The missile struck true. But Vargas was more surprised than hurt.

"Ho, there! Jean Banquo—you tiger!" he bellowed, as he landed in a heap and rolled over on his hands and knees. "Curse your nonsense! Leave off. First you try to bore a hole in me, and then try to break both my skull and my neck. You are determined to kill somebody! Are you crazy, hey? Let me out of this, or I'll send some lead of my own up there!"

"Dog of a Spaniard!" howled the dwarf, ready to strike another blow with the remaining pistol, "you have proven a traitor. You have tried to interfere with my vengeance—"

"*Caramba!*"

"And you shall die down there, with Hubert Ulster, the murderer!"

"Thunders!" blurted Vargas: and he roared back: "You are an ass! If I wished to escape you, could I not do so?—you forget the other door from the corridor to the front cellar, by which I can gain the closet in the entry, and be outside the house before you reach the gallery. But I do not seek to interfere with you or your vengeance, and—*diablos!* you have nigh mashed, shot, and broken me in pieces. Listen to me: you are on the wrong track. Hubert Ulster is no murderer. He did not kill your father, nor did he stab anybody at all! Look, now; I have this night come from the side of a dead man, who swore and confessed, before he died, that he had witnessed the whole scene in the *Labyrinth*. It was not Hubert, but Grafton Ulster, who killed your father—"

"Lies! Lies!" screamed the dwarf.

"*Caramba!* not lies, but truths. I have the proof—the proof. There is one alive, besides myself, who heard and will vouch for the confession!"

"Lies! Lies!" cried the Spider, again. "You invent this to escape yourself, and to save the life of the man who stabbed my father!"

"By all the saints in heaven! I swear it is no lie. And I tell you, if I wanted to escape, I could do so easily by this door. If you are able to go with me, I can prove to you that Grafton Ulster is the murderer you should have hunted down in the last ten years. You are drunk or crazy, if you will not listen to reason! You have followed a false trail. I can prove it. Do you hear me?—hey!—you crazy man!" the last as he heard the brother and sister talking in an undertone.

"Make up your mind quick," he snapped, "or I'll be off by this other exit."

Presently, the voice of Tyron Wirth:

"Coco Vargas, you may come up here—"

"Good," and Vargas again started to ascend.

"But, mark me: I have reloaded this pistol."

"Point it away from my nose, then. You are full of a devilish humor to-night, and not over particular whose brains you blow out!"

He joined them at the top of the flight, and glared savagely and frowned wickedly with his piercing eyes and begrimed face.

"Ho! it is fine sport all round, I think!" he laughed, with the accent and mien of a grinning hyena. "I have near been blown to atoms by the infernal gas below, had two bullets fired at me, got a crack on my head, a tumble down these steps, my face burned, and—"

"If what you hint at is true,"—said the Spider, who was not then thinking of the Spaniard's adventures—"though I do not now believe it, for I saw Hubert Ulster holding the knife in my father's neck—all will be well. If you have lied to me—as I now suspect you have—this new bullet will find its lodging in your heart!"

"*Caramba!* Put away your pistol, and save the bullet for Grafton Ulster," said Vargas shuddering involuntarily, as he beheld the ferocious readiness to shoot him depicted in the Spider's wolfish face.

"Come, now: are you able to walk?"

"Yes," answered Tyron, with a grit of his teeth.

"Brother," expostulated Agnes, who saw that the hard shutting of the teeth and lips was to combat a twinge of pain, as he stood firmly on his feet—"brother, you are not fit to go out. Your wound!—think of it. You are too weak. Let Coco Vargas bring his proof here."

"Then I will have to lug a dead man through the streets. *Caramba!*"

"No, I will accompany him," declared the dwarf, resolutely, pushing aside the hand that detained him by the arm, while his gleaming little eyes were riveted on Vargas. "We will both go with him—for if this is a trick, I vow before Heaven I will kill him! Lead on, Coco Vargas. Where is this proof?"

The Spaniard wheeled. Tyron Wirth followed; but, despite his nerves of iron and will of rock, his steps were wavering unsteadily.

"Go on! Go on!" he hissed. "Come, Agnes, Jean Banquo, the astrologer, is abroad to night—ha! ha! ha! Something whispers to me to heed what the Spaniard says. But let him beware; if he tricks us, he dies, I say! Come, Agnes—faster. I believe I am stronger than I was," and with the reloaded pistol cocked and ready beneath his cloak—Agnes had brought cloaks and hats for both—he followed the striding Vargas out from the building and along the street.

At the corner of Convent and Dolman streets they chanced upon an idle cab. Vargas enlisted the vehicle immediately.

"In with you!" he growled. "We shall soon have the proofs. *Caramba!* we are going to see a dead body—the body of the man who saw Grafton Ulster do the murder in the *Labyrinth*."

And they were whirled away toward the distant alley in which was the home of the dead Neil Baxter.

The dwarf was still weaker by the time they entered the tumble-down building. They assisted him up the creaky stairs, to the room where Davie, the ruffian, sat with the sheeted corpse.

The moment Tyron Wirth set eyes on the dead man's face—before Davie could wonder what brought the trio there, and before the Spaniard could utter a word—he reeled drunkenly forward and tore the bandages from the crushed and mutilated head.

"Agnes! Agnes!" he cried, glaring at the cold, rigid features, "*it is Grafton Ulster himself!*"

"*Caramba!*—can it be possible?" exclaimed Vargas, stepping quickly to the bedside.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PRESERVATION AND DEATH.

THE antidotal pastilles, placed at the crown of the head and the two ears of Hubert Ulster, burned steadily.

By their positions, their thin smoke rose pyramidically, as it were, round the upturned features of the man, excluding, by their draught, whatever of the poisonous fumes might be remaining in the chamber, and penetrating the nostrils, the lungs, the stomach, with a powerful reactory effect.

The heart that had almost entirely ceased to beat grew more vigorous, and the veins that were iced began to warm. Pretty soon there

was a regular, easy respiration, like that of one who sleeps and smiles in a pleasant dream.

Coco Vargas had rightly suspected what had caused the nearly dead condition of the banker—catching his clew from the announcement made by Agnes, that she had poisoned the lamps.

The whitish powder and its wonderful effect he had witnessed in experiments made by the pseudo astrologer on dogs, cats, rats and reptiles. The white powder was then, in a large chest, in his apartment. More, an antidote to the deadly, flammable stuff, if used in time—a compound manufactured into the darkish pastilles now playing their important part—was also laid by in the same chest, to which the Spaniard instantly darted upon being hurled through the curtains by the unexpected though not severe explosion.

While Vargas was holding a rapid dialogue with the dwarf, after the pistol-shots and the tumble down the stone stairs, Hubert Ulster had revived to a state of semi-consciousness, in which he could hear the murmur of voices, exclamations, cries, without being able to distinguish the words uttered. His mind was swimming a little, his frame trembled, yet he did not immediately answer: the smoke of the pastilles, which he freely breathed, produced a most agreeable sensation, a vision of glorious enigmas, plunging him in a revel of languorous pleasure, from which it was not easy or desirable to awake.

But, by the time the three pastilles had crumbled away to ashes, he had fully recovered—remaining upon his back, with his eyes open, striving to recollect where he was in that chaos of darkness, and what had disturbed a dream so heavenly. And by this time, also, Coco Vargas, Tyron Wirth and Agnes, were hurrying from the building, to seek that proof which was to convince the Spider of his mistake in aiming at the destruction of Hubert Ulster.

Starting first to a sitting posture, and slowly dragging one hand in bewilderment across his eyes, Ulster presently rose to his feet—then extended and moved his arms around with clutching hands, as if expecting to grasp something or somebody in the goblin blackness.

Then, suddenly, his situation flashed upon him; the interview between Francoise and the astrologer, his interruption of Jean Banquo's frenzy by firing the shot of hate and fury, the disappearance of Francoise and the dwarf, the poisoned lamp, his gradual sinking into a horrible insensibility with a voice of vengeance taunting him—all this poured on his now active brain, startling him with a fresh dread of further danger lurking near.

"Ha! Azrak! Azrak!" he cried, stepping quickly aside, and groping blindly, "where are you! Speak. Are you dead? What has become of you in this accursed hole? I am alive. Azrak, I say!"

As he called loudly, and moved sideways, his toe hooked in a body on the floor. Stooping, he felt the breast, the bald head, the wrist of the body. There was no pulsation, no indication of a single vital spark in the stiffened figure.

"Sdeath! It is he—Azzrak. Wake up. Azrak! Rouse! There is hope yet. I am myself again. We may force our way out of this abominable prison. Come. But, he don't hear me. Azrak! Wake! The poor fellow is past all hearing!"

It was the African's body that Ulster fingered and pulled and shook, while he hoped vainly that his follower had also survived.

By long association and an habitual dependence upon the mulatto in many ways of service—the more so considering that they had grown up together, and naturally formed a strong mutual attachment—Ulster was prone to estimate him as, indeed, his only valued friend, since the date of the hasty flight from England. To lose him was a severe loss.

But Coco Vargas had not placed pastilles at the head of the African; moreover, his head and shoulders lay directly amid the scattered portions of the whitish powder which had been re-ignited by the recent gentle explosion, and which burned considerably before Vargas stamped it out. An unresisting victim to the terrible poison used by Agnes, he was beyond all help at the moment of his employer's recovery.

"I see how it is!" the tortured banker wailed and hissed. "I am alone—alone in this fearful tomb—saved, by some miracle, from the

poisoned lamps, to die of starvation, buried alive where none can find me. And that Satanic dwarf, who did not get my bullet in his heart after all—curse him!—leaves me to my fate, rejoices in my doom, is gleeful in thus avenging his murdered father. No—no—it must not be! I am innocent! Let me out! Let me out! Ha! what's this?"

As he sprung again to his feet, he tripped upon another object on the floor; the stout cane which the African had carried when they entered the den, and which he now held in a death-gripe at arm's length, over and out from his head.

Ulster snatched the cane from the rigid fingers, as if about to defend himself from the onslaught of some skulking, invisible fiend.

As he gripped the heavy cane, he retreated backward. The movement brought him squarely in the doorway; and he uttered a surprised cry—for the fresh air he inhaled, and a faint glimmer which he now perceived for the first time, told him that the door of the den was open wide.

He turned and groped swiftly along the corridor toward the faint light, which was from the swinging lamp brought to the cellar by Agnes when she used the couch for the wounded Spider.

Soon he reached the cellar; then up to the room above, and the next room—passing the hinged picture in the alcove, crossing the art gallery, down the front stairs, through the black obscurity of the entry, a frightened, desperate man, expecting to be attacked at every step, and in whose bloodshot orbs burned a terrible fire that boded ill for whosoever should bar his progress. Then he fled from the building.

CHAPTER XXVII. OUT OF THE FURNACE.

AN expression of blank amazement came over the face of Francoise Ellory when she heard the voice of the one who worked with a pick-ax on the outside of the closet in which she and her lover were imprisoned.

"Gilbert!" she whispered breathlessly, "it is Hubert Ulster!"

Though Francoise had related most all that had transpired at the den of the astrologer, she was true to the promise given ere being permitted to leave the weird house on Mississippi avenue; she did not tell Gilbert Montrose that she had left her pretending uncle in the power of enemies who had sworn to consummate his death.

Hence his presence there, at the panel-door of the closet, astounded her—knowing how securely prisoned he had been—while it caused the model-maker no extraordinary surprise.

"He has come for the gold, Gilbert!" she added, in a low, excited tone. "He is pretty desperate, as I have reason to be sure; and if he finds us here to thwart his object, Heaven only knows what will be the result!"

Instead of replying, the model-maker snatched the lamp from her hand and extinguished it.

Faster fell the blows on the outside. The iron tooth of the pick was rapidly tearing away the panel.

In their cramped confinement, the sound of the hard strokes thudded deafeningly.

They waited in silence. Montrose was gathering his strength for a formidable wrestle. He, too, anticipated a struggle with the plotting and desperate banker.

Suddenly the panel crashed open.

Hubert Ulster vented a cry of satisfaction, and sprung to grasp the golden coveted prize within.

Then there was another crash, another cry, piercing and frightful; a noise of some falling and weighty mass; a stillness like the solitude of tombs settled round the awed lovers.

"Gilbert! Gilbert! something awful has happened." Francoise reached and grasped his sleeve, and her clasp was weak with trembling.

For several seconds they listened. Not a sound.

The model-maker ventured to grope forward. He felt about him on all sides, upward, downward—as he stooped with feeling fingers, he drew back shuddering. His hands were wet with a warm, slimy, gluey something, the contact of which sent a clammy thrill to his heart.

"Francoise!" he exclaimed, bushedly.

"Oh, Gilbert! what has happened? Tell me."

For reply he produced a match from his pocket, and hastened to relight the lamp.

But before the lamp was burning, and while the dim flicker of the match faintly illumined their surroundings, Francoise covered her eyes with her hands, and cried out in horror.

It was a ghastly sight she saw.

And when, after a moment, she looked up, the model-maker had vanished from her side!

Directly across the floor-sill of the panel entrance to the closet, reaching from side to side, was a stout wooden rod, passing through an inverted shoulder at one end—this end notched into a second and perpendicular rod, which was notched again into a third, an iron rod, extending, reverse, through a second shoulder or leverage, half-way across the top of the entrance.

The protruding end of the iron rod was wrought in prongs, and on the prongs was a rugged stone of about sixty pounds' weight, suspended, as it were, by almost a hair, so delicate was its adjustment.

Hubert Ulster had tripped upon the first rod. The trap—a contrivance of the Spider's—was instantly sprung. Dislocating the notched ends, the monstrous stone was precipitated from its perch; and the body of the banker being in a stooping posture as he sprung forward, the great rock from above fell squarely upon his head, crushing the skull, pinning him to the sill strip, a mangled, frightful object.

One cry, a shriek of agony, and the prophecy was fulfilled—the prophecy on the paper which Tyron Wirth had posted upon the interior panel: "*If you enter, you die!*"

The wonder is, that Gilbert Montrose—when he beat desperately and in vain about the strong-lined closet, seeking to liberate himself and Francoise—did not fall a victim to the devilishly-concealed trap.

And this was the second item of which Jean Banquo had failed to warn Francoise when he instructed her how to open the mysterious hiding-place. We say that, when Francoise looked up, after the shock caused by so ghastly a sight, the model-maker had vanished.

Gilbert paused not to ascertain how horrible had been the accident to the banker. He knew that, at that moment, there were flames spreading in the next room; the building was in imminent danger of being burnt to ashes; a delay to combat the progress of the fire was to woo it on in its devastating greed.

Springing over Ulster's body, while Francoise stood with her face buried in her hands, he rushed to the hall to the door of the adjoining apartment. Bursting in the door, he staggered back, nearly suffocated by dense volumes of smoke; then, quickly taking his coat in hand, he bounded into the flames and battled manfully.

But the fire had gained too fair a start. Long, darting tongues of red and glare seemed weaving an oven of death around him; he leaped here and there, scorched, blistered, strangling at times; the coat circled, and waved, and slashed in every direction—a useless struggle.

The floor was one blazing brand. The flames reared higher and higher. Presently the windows cracked and shivered: the glass jingled in brittle heaps, the fiery element roared out upon the night, illumining the street below, and the sky above, and the houses round.

Gilbert retreated from his hopeless labors.

In the entry he encountered Francoise and Martha—for Francoise, hearing the surging, hissing, and stamping of feet, and catching the odor of burning wood, had cast one glance into the seething room, at her lover, as he strove like a mad fiend to allay the fire, then fled to the stairway, where her loud calls aroused and startled the cook.

"Gilbert! Gilbert! is there no hope?"

"None!" he cried. "In ten minutes this part of the building will be wholly enveloped. I knew of this, Francoise, while we were helpless prisoners in the closet. Had your uncle not come, it would have been our death-furnace! So much for the infernal trickeries of Jean Banquo." (He still believed the explosion and fire from the false flue to be a diabolical contrivance of the astrologer's.) "But, I say we owe our salvation to Hubert Ulster.—Ah! where is he?"

"Dead!" and Francoise was explaining the sudden catastrophe, when Martha interrupted with a scream:

"Look! look! it's onto us. Here it comes!"

As the words broke from her lips, a huge billow of smoke and flame rolled out through the door—rolled like a wave of some boiling, glaring, hissing sea—along the hall, toward

them, bursting ere it reached them, and leaving them enshrouded in a resinous vapor.

This outburst was followed by another, and another. Quicker than the coil of serpents, the fire-tongues licked around, catching and devouring everything flammable, scattering sparks in showers, luminously galeating the door-frame.

"Fly, Francoise! There is not a moment to lose!" he exclaimed.

"Heavens! Gilbert, can nothing be saved?"

"Nothing. Fly. The fire is upon us. But, stop!"—he wheeled and dashed into the paneled room—"yes, something can be saved."

In another moment he was back again. In each hand he carried three of the small gold-bags, and between his teeth a seventh.

"Come," he urged, through the teeth that were locked tightly on the bag, "we must save ourselves. Haste, dear Francoise."

"But, the body of Hubert Ulster!" Francoise cried.

Gilbert shuddered.

"Come, come; we cannot save it. And if we do not hurry, we, too, will perish here. See!"

They glanced back up the stairs. The fire was massing forward to the banisters. The heat of the advancing surge was forced down upon them, already the smoke was thick and stifling in their way, and the roar, the snap, the crackle of ashing timbers grew louder.

On the next floor the model-maker paused.

"Francoise, cannot you and Martha assist Viola?—Martha is strong. Quick. My hands are full, and this gold is heavy."

"Heaven forgive me!" murmured Francoise, as she bounded toward the room where Viola was sleeping, unconscious of peril; and as she hurried to the bedside: "Viola! Viola! up, girl! Be strong for your life! The house is on fire!"

To arouse the maid was the action of a second, and Martha supported her with stout brown arms.

The three hastened to Montrose, who was on the front steps. His voice rung loudly on the night.

But others were spreading the alarm.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" rose lustily afar and close.

Bells were sounding, heavy, clumsy engines were rumbling—not the modern tocsin of telegraphy, nor the steam apparatus with its racing horses, else the handsome residence might not have fallen such an easy prey to the destroyer.

"Where is Martha?" suddenly asked Gilbert, turning to his betrothed.

"She has vanished. I saw her not a moment ago. Martha! Martha! Where can the woman be?"

"We have no time to lose. Come, Francoise—to a place of safety!"

They hurried from under the showering cinders. Viola seemed to master her weakness, in the emergency, and kept up briskly.

A crowd was gathering around the doomed edifice. Rows and aisles of men were busy passing the bucket—the old-time fire-bucket, which each citizen then kept in his house, initialed and ready.

Seeking a house not far distant, our trio glanced back.

The third story had fallen in. A vast sheet of spirals, roaring and red, spread upward to the black sky, shedding its lurid glare for miles.

And Martha?

Avaricious woman! She had taken note of the model-maker's brief visit to the secret closet; she saw the labels on the bags he carried, and heard the unmistakable chink of gold.

If there were seven bags in the closet, why not one more—eight?

Disappearing from their side, she ran up the stairs holding her apron over her face, with only a small place uncovered for one eye.

Through the smoke and intense heat, up, up—soon she reached the third story, then plunged into the apartment, groping for the closet. She found the opening in the wall; she grasped the golden prize she sought—not one, but three bags, for the whole number had been ten.

But, even as her hands closed on the coveted treasure, her head swam dizzily, she coughed till the blood rose in her throat. She turned to flee. So thick was the smoke, she could not see, and, forgetting the relative positions of the closet and the door, she ran wildly in this way and that, her garments burning, terrified

to madness by her predicament, utterly bewildered, lost in the impenetrable and suffocating cloud.

Denser gathered the smoke. The flames were lapping around the room, darting at her from sources she could not discover. The wall, wherever she touched it, blistered her hand—a paneled, wooden wall, soon to crash in and engulf her in the whirling eddies of the molten furnace beyond.

She sunk down—staggered to her feet again. The apron was no longer held to her glowing face. With features distorted and purple, she threw herself madly about, seeking for the exit.

A slight circumstance was thus dooming her to a horrible death. A draught, occasioned by the bursting of the windows in the burning room and in the now blazing entry, had drawn shut the door of the paneled room, at the moment Martha grasped the golden bags. A dozen times she had found the door, but, being deceived by its resemblance to the rest of the paneling—which was natural in her desperate excitement—she knew not that the knob was within a span of her clutching hand. And under and over the door, through its transom, the flames, and from the washboard, the false flue in the closet, streams and streams of black, hot, smothering smoke.

Presently she was overcome by the roasting atmosphere. The swollen lips that coughed blood, or were glued in awful terror, parted in loud, piercing shrieks. She reeled, tossed her arms furiously, dropping two of the bags and beating her breast with clinched fist, tearing her hair—all the while gasping for breath, uttering moans and wails; then fell heavily to the floor.

A gurgle, a spasm, and Martha lay stiff and motionless, gripping the single bag of gold with rigid fingers.

Two corpses in the paneled room. Two lifeless bodies ready for the fiery gulf about to yawn.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

PUNCTUAL to his engagement with Davie, the ruffian, Coco Vargas repaired to the storehouse adjoining the Merchants' Bank, at noon on the day following the night of Neil Baxter's death—Neil Baxter who was, in reality, Grafton Ulster, the murderer of Roderick Wirth.

We have shown that he first drew every dollar of his deposit at the bank; also, that the movements of the Spaniard and the ruffian were observed by two officers of the law, and Favia Claremont, the Sphinx.

The meeting at noon was but temporary. They separated shortly, and relocked the building.

There was no attempt to molest them. The spies of justice were warily awaiting an opportunity to pounce upon the burglars at their work.

We pass over time.

Night. All still, all deserted, scarce a sound upon the street. A night as dark, dismal and wet as that on which our story opened.

In the gloom without were gathered half a dozen figures on whose breasts shone a polished insignia of office. Police.

There was a seventh figure—a female. Unnoticed she crouched in the shadows, her hands clinched sternly round the stock and barrel of a pistol, with thumb on the hammer and finger to the trigger.

The vigil of the six, and the eyes of the one, were bent upon the warehouse.

And while the seven watched, a clock tolled forth the hour of ten.

We glance inside, behind the scene marked F in the diagram. Two men in shirts of blue linen, wearing caps and pants of corduroy, and each a belt with a brace of pistols, were laboring sturdily at the hole indicated by the letter C in the diagram.

Vargas and Davie.

By the light of lanterns they had begun a task which would occupy a week in completion if undisturbed. The flooring was ripped up, they were waist-deep, pick and shovel were plying steadily.

Neither word nor whisper passed. They noted not the tolling of the clock; nor dreamed of danger encompassing them.

But Vargas was less alert than his companion.

"Hist!" said the ruffian, pausing with shovel raised.

"What is it?" demanded Vargas.

"I heard a footstep, captain."

"Your own heels in the clay, no doubt. *Caramba!* To work."

The pick and the shovel fell again—but again Davie hesitated.

"Well—what now?"

"I tell you, captain, I heard a noise."

"The rattle of the gravel on the boards. Throw out easier, then."

Vargas kept on.

Davie was too old a night-hawk to accept excuses at once.

"Hist!" he warned, a third time.

"*Caramba!*"

Say, captain, I kinder think there's somebody 'hind the screen."

"Eh? Bah! you are frightened at your own noises. To work, here."

The pick and the shovel thudded and scraped. Perspiration dripped from their brows. There was no repetition of the sound that had alarmed Davie, and his suspicions relaxed.

Soon they were neck-deep. Good implements in the hands of muscular men make wonderful progress. Their heads disappeared below the level of the floor; the dirt-heap, extending from wall to wall, blocked the screen from their view.

"Devils! A light here!" hissed Vargas, suddenly. "Climb up and fetch a lantern, or I may accidentally split your skull with my pick-point."

Davie clambered up. No sooner had he reached the top of the dirt-heap than he uttered a yell of surprise mingled with fear.

"Hello!—captain! It's all up. Fly. We're caught!"

Six figures stood around the hole. Six revolvers were leveled at Davie as he cried—at Vargas as he shot upward out of the pit.

"Surrender!" shouted the lieutenant.

"Never!" howled Vargas. "Furies of thunder!—die first! Take that!"

He blazed his weapons in their faces. Davie, whose first impulse was to flee, caught the spirit of "pluck," and emptied his pistols among them.

Vargas seemed transformed into a demon. His eyes flashed, and his features of dirt, flush and defiance were contorted savagely. On the top of the pile he confronted them at bay; his powerful form was swelling with passion.

"Surrender, Coco Vargas!"

Bang! went a pistol for reply.

"Fire! ordered the lieutenant, excited and angry. Two of his men had fallen, the prey was still free.

"Fire!" shoot them down!"

Then the cracking of revolvers. Bullets hailed around the desperate pair, the remaining four dashed forward as they fired.

Smoke, lead, blows, curses, shouts—a din of noises and a struggle for life.

Vargas battled like a tiger. Foaming with rage, smarting with wounds, howling terrible oaths, he met his assailants with a front of steel and strokes like a sweeping sledge.

"Not yet! Not yet!" he roared. "Back there!—hol come on then! *Caramba!* Up, Davie!—to the death! Up!"

Davie lay deaf and gory on the pile. Alone Vargas fought; alone hopeless against odds, but fierce, frenzied and bold.

Blood streamed over his face and shirt. The huge fists that tumbled over his enemies, were dyed red, by drawing them across his eyes to clear his vision.

They surrounded him. Wounded in front and rear, beset on all sides, he drove them back once more and cleared a momentary path. A Herculean strength sustained him; he knocked down another before him—then dashed like a dying buck, giddy and headlong toward the screen.

"Surrender, or we'll fire again!" cried the lieutenant.

The Spaniard uttered a wild shriek of defiance. Felling the lieutenant, who nearly had him by the throat, he reeled around the wooden screen, and his bloody hand tore open the door.

But he halted, confronted by a hated apparition; another, a horrible scream issued from his frothing lips.

Simultaneously, a whip-like crack in his face, and he toppled over heavily, writhing in agony.

Favia Claremont stood over him, holding a smoking weapon.

"*Caramba!* he groaned, straining fearfully. "Tigress! Woman of Perdition! you have killed me, at last!"

With the words, his blazing eyes glassed, his arms and limbs straightened rigidly—he was dead.

And Favia, bending low, hissed into his ear; "Ay, *Coco Vargas*, 'at last.' Behold the Sphinx. This is the end of the trail!"

Of our characters, now, but a few words remain to be added.

The residence on Elliot avenue was not entirely destroyed by fire. The third story had crashed in upon the second, but the first floor was intact. And among the ruins charred timbers, brick, ironwork, debris of moldering heat—the bones of two human beings were gathered.

The banker, it was readily believed, had perished in the flames, but the awful circumstance of his death was never known.

Jean Banquo, the astrologer, was never seen nor heard of in St. Louis, after the night of September 21, 18—. He vanished suddenly, taking with him his valuable collection of paintings, and covering up all traces of the subterranean chambers under his abode. The house of the artist astrologer still stands, improved handsomely by the additions of several who have owned it since the early date of our narrative. Mayhap there is, even now, a prostrate skeleton in the secret vault beneath the cellar-floor of the building on Mississippi avenue—the remains of Azrak—surrounded, in its singular tomb, by the weird instruments and designs of the astrologer's den.

We need not follow Favia Claremont further in the eventful career which a strange fate marked out for her. Perhaps, in a future work, we may chronicle the adventures of this unhappy woman.

And what else? Nothing—except that Gilbert Montrose, the model-maker, and Francoise, his wife, were soon made very happy.

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